SEXUALLY REDEEMED:
LEARNING TO REST IN THE FINISHED WORK OF THE CROSS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis-project is about creating a space for men in our church (Sanctuary, Kennesaw, GA.) to deepen their belief in the finished work of the cross specifically as it relates to sexual brokenness and shame. Consideration was given to the biblical, theological, and cultural implications of shame, transformation, and healing. The thesis-project includes an initial survey of men in our church regarding sexual brokenness and the healing nature of community, and then describes a study designed to engage men and women for transformation.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM IN ITS SETTING

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.
Matthew 11.38–30

Every man has reminiscences which he would not tell to everyone, but only to his friends. He has other matters in his mind, which he would not reveal even to his friends, but only to himself, and that in secret. But there are other things which a man is afraid to tell even to himself, and every decent man has a number of such things stored away in his mind.[1]
Fyodor Dostoevsky

Prologue

Ben[2] quietly knocked on the open door of my office and stumbled in one Wednesday night. He'd been here before. Ben had his workbook in his hand from his men's small group study. He wouldn't look at me. Tears stream down his face landing on the floor between us.

"I love you, Ben," I whispered as I hugged him.

"I fu**ed up."

His tears were now joined by groans as he crumbled onto the couch. I pulled my chair close, close enough to feel his pain, close enough for him to allow me to hold some of his pain. Close enough for me to know I have no idea what's going on with him, but I know.

"Ben, look at me," I said.

"I can't," he wailed. "I can't!" His voice reverberating through the empty offices.

I sat silently and prayed loud enough for him to hear, "Spirit you've led Ben here, lead us

[1] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From the Underground* (Auckland, NZ: The Floating Press, 2009), 39.
[2] All names in this thesis-project are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

now together."

His sobs began to have moments of breath. He waved his book at me, looked up and out the window, and then covered his face with both hands.

"Ben, look at me." I leaned in slowly. "Look at me, Ben. God's brought you here." He wiped his face and leaned back. "Ben, in this moment, right here, right now, you are exactly what God had in mind when He created you."[3]

He forced a smile and shook his head in disagreement, "How can you say that? After everything, I've done…You don't even know what I've done, and to whom…There's so much shame."

"I know what Jesus has done. I know what He accomplished. I know what He paid for. I know He loves you, just as you are, right where you are…Can we talk about it? All of it?"

Naming the Shame Beneath Sexual Brokenness

Shame is a pandemic in our age of sexual brokenness. But shame is not just an emotion—that painful feeling of exposed unworthiness; it is, more deeply, a belief. Ben believes that because of his sexual brokenness, he is unlovable, and because he thinks he cannot change his behavior, he further believes he will always be unlovable. Unloved by God, unloved by his family, and unable to love himself.

[3] I often use this blessing in situations of crisis. Rarely does someone stumble into my office to want to learn how to parse Greek. They come to my office to confess. I've learned over the years that when someone comes to my office they are wanting a reminder that their life still matters, that they haven't sinned so much that they've been kicked off the Jesus team. What I experience is akin to what happens more regularly in a Catholic setting. The man sitting before me is essentially saying, "*Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."* There will be a time when the sin is addressed. There will be a "Go and sin no more" statement, but it is not in this or for this moment. If there was an overarching theme of this thesis-project it would be summarized in this phrase, "You are exactly what God had in mind when He created you," as written by Father Greg Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, (New York, NY: Free Press, A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2011), 248.

Ben is not alone. He is just like many other men in our church and neighborhood who stop me in the parking lot, invite me for a Coke, or send a text, or who stay hidden in their fear, overwhelmed by shame. Unwanted sexual behavior brings about both guilt and shame. But shame is way beyond guilt. The person coming into my pastoral office already knows he has done wrong. Usually, he has been caught or confessed. The consequences vary: some are offered forgiveness from a spouse or a friend; others have been kicked out of their house, lost their job, and had their picture and profile listed on the Cobb County Sex Offender website; some have been unable to sleep, or to love, or be loved, even lift their heads. They wear the cloak of darkness and believe they cannot take it off. Because their sexual brokenness persists the shame deepens.

The people who sit before me feel both guilt and shame. The struggle is not just that they have done something bad, but they have come to believe they *are* inherently and irredeemably bad. Merle Fossum describes shame this way: "A pervasive sense of shame is the ongoing premise that one is fundamentally bad, inadequate, defective, unworthy, or not fully valid as a human being."[4] Lewis Smedes makes a similar distinction between shame and guilt. "We feel guilty for what we do. We feel shame for what we are. A person feels guilt because he did something wrong. A person feels shame because he *is* wrong."[5]

Smedes expounds on the nature of shame, and the possibility of healing.

> We have shame when we persistently feel that we are not acceptable, maybe unworthy, and are less than the good person we are supposed to be. Shame is vague, undefined heaviness that presses on our spirit, dampens our gratitude for the goodness of life, and slackens the free flow of joy. Shame is a primal feeling, the kind that seeps into and discolors all our other feelings, about ourself but about almost everyone and everything else in our life as well…The good news is that shame can be healed. I believe that healing

[4] Merle Fossum, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame You Don't Deserve (*Grand Rapids, MI: First HarperCollins, 1993), 20.
[5] Smedes, *Shame and Grace,* 9.

> our feelings of shame gets its best start with a spiritual experience—specifically, an experience of amazing grace.[6]

Shame, as Smedes and Fossum define it, is a belief that sinks to the center of our being and defines our sense of self. Shame has the capacity to become the filter through which all our thoughts, feelings, and actions are passed. This is the power of shame. It affects our core being, informing, shaping, and constructing a false self.

The struggle with shame is not limited to the local church; it stretches beyond her walls and fills the neighborhood. In 2010 shame researcher Brene Brown gave a TedTalk on vulnerability in which she expounded on the power of shame. As of this writing, 12 years later, more than 57,000,000 people have viewed/listened to her talk, a testimony to the relevance of the subject.[7] Brown's definition of shame is like that of Smedes. "I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of *believing* that we are flawed *and therefore* unworthy of love and belonging—something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection."[8] (italics mine)

Naked and Without Shame

The end of the creation narrative in Genesis gives a beatific vision of sexual health and wholeness when it says, "Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame."[9] Their lack of shame was not due to ignorance, but innocence. They felt no shame because there was no

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[6] Smedes, *Shame and Grace*, 14.

[7] Brene Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*, TEDx Houston, June 2010, accessed May 1, 2022. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?language=en.

[8] Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York, NY: Avery, 2015), 69.

[9] Genesis 2.25.

reason to believe that they were unloved, unlovable, or unworthy. They had nothing to hide.[10]

Curt Thompson comments that the writer of the narrative chose "shame" for a reason.

> He could have said the man and woman were naked and really happy (who wouldn't be?), or they were naked and strong or confident, or they were naked and without fear or anger or sadness or disappointment or regret. And to be certain, all of these may have been true. With so many to choose from, why the emphasis on shame? It would seem that it is no accident.[11]

Perhaps shame is the only word that could describe the painful feelings and dark beliefs that accompany original sin: I feel exposed, unworthy, unlovable, and irredeemable.

Gene Edwards paints a picture of what Garden life might have been like for Adam and Eve before shame.

> "They are never distracted from one another, for there is no distraction. In their eyes, nothing else exists! She has no blemish; she has no wrinkle. There is nothing imperfect in all her being. He loves her continuously. And with abandoned, innocent, unbridled passion, she loves him in return.
>
> "She has full confidence in her place beside him. No reassurances need be given that he loves her. She never questions, but totally accepts his love. There is no fear of displeasing him or losing him.
>
> "She is beautiful, she knows that, yet there is no pride. Rather, a deep inward knowing that he is lord of all earth, and she is . . . his perfect mate."[12]

But then it happened. Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command, eating "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," and the spell was broken. Sin and shame entered the world.

> The eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

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[10] For an in-depth philosophical view of the origins of shame see J. David Velleman's work entitled, *"The Genesis of Shame."* Princeton University Press, 2001.

[11] Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 99.

[12] This is a beautiful picture of what Garden Life might have been. I've used this picture a few times in ministry, most recently when conducting a vow renewal for a couple who have been married for 50 years. While the Eden to come will look different than this picture, the couple who renewed their vows look a lot like this. It's a magnificent testimony. Picture painted intimately by Gene Edwards, *The Divine Romance* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1984), 66-67.

> Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.[13]

Shame is not what caused the recognition of nakedness. It was sin. But shame was the feeling of unforgivable unworthiness that accompanied the sin, and fueled the attempt to cover their nakedness, to hide and to blame. To this day shame is why human beings continue to cover, hide, and blame. Curt Thompson adds insightful commentary on the destructive power of shame, when he writes,

> Shame is not just a consequence of something our first parents did in the Garden of Eden. It is the emotional weapon that evil uses to (1) corrupt our relationships with God and each other, and (2) disintegrate any and all gifts of vocational vision and creativity. These gifts include any area of endeavor that promotes goodness, beauty and joy in and for the lives of others, whether that be teaching our first graders, loving our spouse well, managing forests, conducting healing prayer services, creating a new medical technology, offering psychotherapy or composing symphonies. Shame is a primary means to prevent us from using the gifts we have been given. Shame, therefore, is not simply an unfortunate, random, emotional event that came with us out of the primordial evolutionary soup. It is both a source and result of evil's active assault on God's creation, and a way for evil to try to hold out until the new heaven and earth appear at the consummation of history.[14]

There are devastating consequences to sin, including physical death, separation from God, separation from others, and separation from the true self. But amidst the consequences God continues to act. For God is, and has always been, the Divine Initiator, the God who creates, who brings beauty from chaos, who gives life and rescues and redeems.[15] God is the animator, motivator and sustainer of all things. And in Adam and Eve's fallen state He acts. He makes the first move in His plan of redemption and begins working to get His family back.[16]

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[13] Genesis 3.7-8.

[14] Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*, 14-15.

[15] God is always previous. There are no surprises in heaven. As Sovereign, He orchestrates all things for our good and His glory. For a more in-depth theological understanding of this term please see *God: The Initiator of Salvation.* https://soteriology101.com/2019/05/21/god-the-initiator-of-salvation/.

[16] Phillip Yancey, *God Gets His Family Back* Phillip Yancey website, accessed May 23, 2022. https://philipyancey.com/god-gets-his-family-back.

Notice both consequence and protection in the Genesis narrative:

> The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.[17]

Adam and Eve cannot move toward God, guilty and ashamed as they are because of sin. But God moves toward them. He fully covers their nakedness, using animal skin, signifying a greater sacrifice and salvation to come. Then, in His mercy, God removes Adam and Eve from the Garden. Does that not sound like mercy? Well, consider Joel Tay's comments as he reflects on the Tree of Life:

> When Adam sinned, mankind became estranged from God and physical death entered the world. In this way, through one man, physical death entered the world (cf. Romans 5:12, 17), and through Adam, death now came to all men. If Adam had eaten from the Tree of Life after he sinned, he would have lived forever, but he would have lived in a state of eternal estrangement from God.
>
> While death is tragic and an enemy to God's perfect creation, this same curse of death, is also what allowed Christ to become incarnate as a man and to actually die on the cross as a ransom for His people. If Adam had eaten from the Tree of Life after he had sinned, all mankind would have lived forever, estranged from God; and Christ, our Kinsman-Redeemer, would not have been able to die on the cross in redemption. In other words, if God did not subject sinful humanity with a curse of death, sinful man would not have any chance of being reconciled back to God. If God did not prevent Adam from eating from the Tree of Life after he had sinned, a future redemption through the physical death of one of Adam's descendants (Jesus Christ) would not have been possible.[18]

Had Adam and Eve eaten from the Tree of Life, Tay argues, they and their descendants would have lived forever estranged from God; and the incarnate Christ would not have redeemed

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[17] Genesis 3.21-24.

[18] Joel Tay, *Why Did God Prevent Adam From Eating From the Tree of Life After He Had Sinned?* Creation website, accessed June 24, 2022. https://creation.com/god-prevent-adam-eating-from-tree-of-life.

them from this tragic condition through His death and resurrection. Christ would not have come and God would not have gotten His family back. Banishment from Eden, therefore, was an act of protection.

It must be remembered that salvation does not begin with original sin. Creation begins with man's original glory, and when that is lost, God begins to redeem that glory, and the story of the Bible becomes the story of amazing, saving grace. J.D. Walt highlights this point:

> *Salvation* doesn't begin with original sin but with original glory. It doesn't begin with the fall from grace but the glory of Eden. It doesn't begin with the problem of sin but with the power of God. Before there was ever a sinner there was already a Savior…*salvation* recognizes you are created in the image of Almighty God. Darkness corrupted and sin distorted this image beyond recognition, but grace restores it utterly and completely.[19]

God is the Creator and Savior who intends to restore humanity to its original glory and innocence through Jesus Christ. And the problem and solution of sexual brokenness is found in Him.

The Problem of Sexual Brokenness

In the summer of 2021, Dr. Chris Cook professor at Gordon-Conwell Seminary gave a presentation on "Addiction and Pastoral Care,"[20] in which he quoted from Jay Stringer's seminal book, *Unwanted*.[21] Focusing on pornography as one dynamic of sexual brokenness, Dr. Cook highlighted the following statistics:

- Approximately 35% of all internet downloads are porn related. Porn sites receive more monthly traffic than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined.
- 47% of US families report pornography is a problem in their homes. The use of porn increases the rate of infidelity by 300+%.

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[19] J.D. Walt, *Concerning This Salvation.* Seedbed website, accessed June 24, 2022. https://seedbed.com/concerning-this-salvation/.

[20] Dr. Chris Cook, *Addiction and Pastoral Care* [Classroom lecture]. June 21, 2021.

[21] Jay Stringer, *Unwanted: How Sexual Brokenness Reveals Our Way to Healing* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2018), 25.

- One in three women watches porn at least once a week.
- 68% of churchgoing men view pornography on a regular basis.
- 57% of senior pastors and 64% of youth pastors admit to struggling with pornography use.
- 40% of adult Christians believe pastors who struggle with pornography should be fired or asked to resign.

If this data is true, and there are numerous studies which suggest it is, then pornography *is* a problem; and the accessibility and widespread acceptance of pornography fuels other problems. In our fallen world "sin begets more sin," and pornography is a doorway to other destructive sexual behaviors: "hook up" apps like Tinder, Bumble, OK Cupid, and websites like AshleyMadison.com which promise discreet connections and so-called sexual fulfillment. But pornography and the sexual sins to which it leads cannot satisfy the desires of the human heart; they can only momentarily sooth the pain. In other words, they are a problem, a serious problem, but not *the* problem. That problem lies deeper—in the brokenness and shame that fuel unwanted sexual sin.

Sexual Brokenness and Shame

Sexual brokenness is innocence lost. Sexual brokenness is any thought or action that breaks the bond of sexual purity instilled in human beings at creation. Sexual brokenness is the reality for any and every person who has lost innocence by choice, coercion, or force. A primary thesis of Jay Stringer's book—and this thesis-project—is that unwanted sexual behavior is rooted in unhealed sexual brokenness. And this unwanted sexual behavior, in turn, leads to greater and greater shame, which eventually rules and ruins the beauty of God's created beings. But it does

not have to. Jesus came to set things right, to break this cycle of sexual sin, and bring God's healing and grace.

In the Introduction of *Unwanted* Jay Stringer tells the story of Jeffrey, whose life illustrates this cycle of sexual brokenness, unwanted behavior and shame:

> The faces Jeffrey sought out in middle school, which brought him a sense of validation and even rest, were now costing him more than tens of thousands of dollars a year when we added up all of the expenses associated with buying sex. These financial costs were only a microcosm of all the other damage occurring in his life: secrecy and isolation in his marriage, anxiety about losing his corporate position if he were discovered, and a deep-seated belief that shame would be his closest ally. The more he bought sex, the more unwanted he felt in every realm of life."[22]

Shame and sin are always connected, but they are not the same thing. Sin is forgiven when relationship with God is restored. Shame, however, is an open wound of unworthiness that keeps the forgiven person from receiving, and living in, the healing which God freely gives. In other words, while sin leaves a scar, unwanted sexual behavior often leaves open wounds of shame.

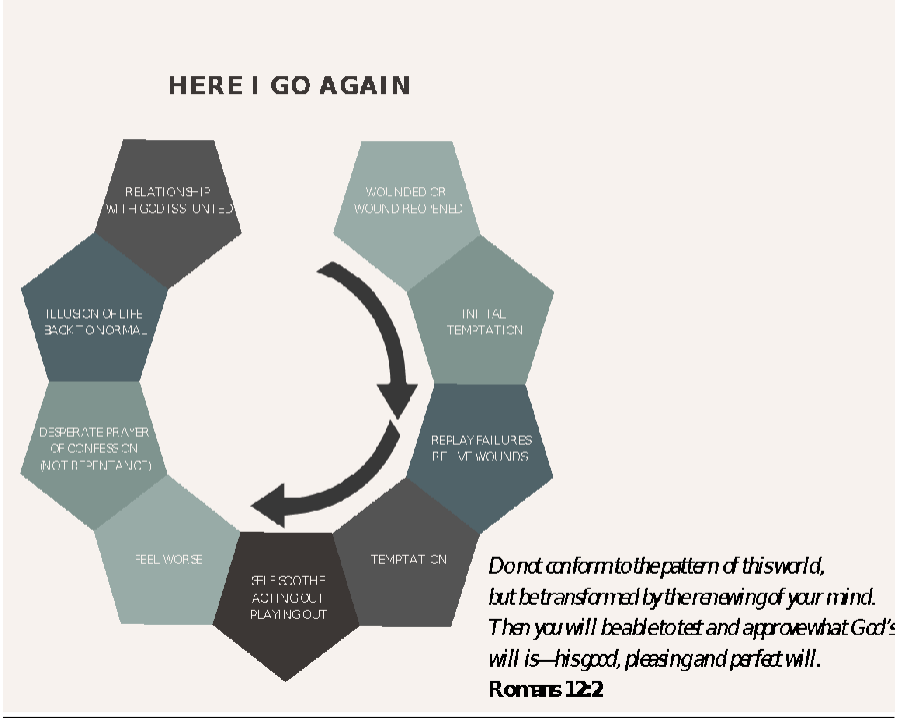
Wounds remain in places where the heart has not healed, or places where there has been an inability to learn to live in the healing Jesus came to bring. When those wounds are touched in thought, feeling or action, they cry out for attention. Shame-filled beliefs, associated with their corresponding feelings of unworthiness, lead the sexually broken to unwanted sexual behavior (like pornography) to momentarily escape or soothe the feeling of shame. Shame leads to unwanted sexual behavior; unwanted sexual behavior leads to shame, and this vicious cycle continues spiraling downward.

In the men's ministry at Sanctuary, we often use the language of a "shame cycle," a cycle that represents a progression from being newly wounded or having a wound reopened, to the downward cycle perpetuated by believing something false about God or oneself. For the sexually

[22] Stringer, *Unwanted*, 23.

broken, shame-informed beliefs open doors for the them to run away to pornography or another type of unwanted sexual behavior. And the enemy of our souls hides the reason *why* we run. The enemy knows that if these shame-informed beliefs are changed, if our beliefs are healed, then deeper wounds would be healed and the compulsion to run to unwanted sexual behavior could be overcome. Life could be lived from a place of healing, wholeness and holiness, instead of fear and compulsion.

Figure 1: "Here I Go Again." Shame Cycle[23]


HERE I GO AGAIN
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS SEVERED
WOUNDED OR WOUND REOPENED
ILLUSION OF LIFE BACK TO NORMAL
INITIAL TEMPTATION
DESPERATE PRAYER OF CONFESSION (NOT REPENTANCE)
REPLAY FAILURES OF PAST WOUNDS
FEEL WORSE
SELF SOOTHE ACTING OUT PLAYING OUT
TEMPTATION
Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Then you will be able to test and approve what God's
will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.
Romans 12:2

[23] "Here I Go Again" is a description of a shame cycle. There are various kinds of shame cycles, all with different causes and outcomes. In our context, a shame cycle is initiated when an open wound is punched, touched, or even grazed. Shame cycles can also occur in places where wounds have been healed. Because shame doesn't follow any logical reaction, even healed places can become susceptible to being reopened. Our inclusion of Romans 12.2 is a reminder that regardless of the cycle, it can be stopped as our "minds are renewed" in Christ. In chapter four this shame cycle will be placed alongside Trevor Hudson's grace cycle to offer an alternative way to live and love.

Jay Stringer reminds us of the power of the evil one, the damage he desires to inflict and the possibility of growing into maturity.

> Acknowledging the role of evil never negates personal responsibility to mature, and in striving for integrity, we can never underestimate the intent of evil to sideline us…Evil hates the beauty of sex, and because it cannot abolish its existence, it works to corrupt its essence. Evil succeeds every time we think of sex and subsequently feel damaged, ruined, and out of control in lust. It has completed massive research on us and knows we are far more likely to pursue shameful sexual behavior when we are experiencing difficult emotions. It also knows we are far more likely to be at war with our desires than to pursue greater beauty for our sexual stories. We may find ourselves longing for marriage or a better marriage, but disappointment is all that ever seems to pass. In our loneliness and anger, we may not choose the maturity of growth; instead we accept the invitation of evil to pursue pornography. Evil seduces us away from personal growth and into an escape that will paradoxically inject us with greater shame.[24]

Healing Our Beliefs

Ben, like most men in our church, has grown up in the south. We often joke that we are the "belt buckle" of the Bible belt. Our elder team is made up exclusively of white, middle aged men. Theologically, all but one are staunch conservatives. We often fall into the default of legalism. "It's easier," one elder recently said. The elder next to him added, "It's easier because it's right." To which the one non-conservative elder responded, "Legalism is nothing but a leader's way of avoiding suffering". Legalism most simply defined "is the conviction that keeping is the ground of our acceptance with God, the ground of God being for us and notagainst us."[26] Our church is steeped in this conviction.

The beliefs of legalism are not only rooted in our local church, but in the local culture. There are sixteen churches within two-square miles of our church. There are six churches on the same road as ours. Our neighborhood, needless to say, is not an unreached people group. Our

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[24] Stringer, *Unwanted,* 42.

[25] Gene Edwards, *A Tale of Three Kings* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), 61.

[26] John Piper, *What is Legalism* Desiring God website, accessed May 19, 2022. https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-legalism.

neighborhood is a "*misreached"* people group. When we began our church eleven years ago I was talking with my high-school daughter and her friend, Kirsten, about how this new church would be a "Jesus Church." To which Kirsten replied, "Mr. Craig, everyone I know is a Christian, but I don't know anyone who lives and loves like Jesus."

Our beliefs desperately need to change. We need healing.

The shame-filled, sexually broken person, more than anyone else, needs his beliefs to be healed. The shackles of legalism must be broken for any kind of freedom to prevail. Theologian and poet J.D. Walt says the conversion journey is from knowledge about God to knowing God. He cites Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 as the text source.

> I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.[27]

Walt says it this way: "There it is: to know this love that surpasses knowledge. That is Paul's testimony. This is conversion: the journey from knowledge to knowing. It makes all the difference in the world."[28] But it is not a straight line from head to heart, from knowledge about God to knowing God. There is a middle path that must be explored before finding our way to knowing; it is the path of "unknowing," or "unlearning." The conversion journey for shame-filled men, bound by legalistic beliefs, will only lead to freedom when it moves from knowledge to unknowing to knowing. Some beliefs must be "unknown" or "unlearned" to believe that God is a God of grace and mercy, a God of love. And believing in a God who graciously loves us in Christ is the Gospel message that overcomes shame.

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[27] Ephesians 3.16-19.

[28] J.D. Walt, *The Critical Difference Between Knowledge and Knowing.* Seedbed website, accessed May 19, 2022. https://seedbed.com/critical-difference-knowledge-knowing/.

We often ask the question around our church, "When you think about God, what do you think about?" There are a vast range of responses, falling along the continuum from knowledge to knowing. "A God of love." "An angry father." "A gentleman, one who would never push his way on me." "An absent father, like my dad." "An ever-present help in my time of need." "My best friend." At Sanctuary, what we believe about God is of eternal importance. As A.W. Tozer famously writes,

> What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.
>
> For this reason, the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.
>
> We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God.[29]

Adam's original idea of God shifts at the fall. His belief about God changes. After eating the fruit he becomes aware of his nakedness and is now afraid.

The man who struggles with unwanted sexual behavior believes God is punitive. When he thinks about God, especially in the moment of acting out, he thinks of God as angry, perhaps even vengeful. He believes God will now enact punishment for his behavior, just as God did for Adam and Eve. Because of the belief that God is angered, even incensed, by unwanted sexual behavior fear pervades. The longer a life is lived in fear the more the belief shifts from God being angry at a specific behavior to God being angry at the person. A person like Ben begins to believe that not only has he done something bad, but he is bad, and nothing he can do will ever change that fact. So Ben hides. Ben covers up his nakedness. Ben separates himself from God,

[29] A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 1.

from others, and from his truest self. When Ben answers Tozer's question, "What do I think about when I think about God?" He thinks how much of a disappointment he is to Him. He thinks that he is worthless in His sight. Ben believes God is disgusted with him, again. He believes He is condemned and will never be able to change.

C.S. Lewis offers a different question to the one posed by Tozer. In his book *The Weight of Glory* Lewis writes,

> I read in a periodical the other day that the fundamental thing is how we think of God.
>
> By God Himself, it is not! How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important. Indeed, how we think of Him is of no importance except in so far as it is related to how He thinks of us.
>
> It is written that we shall "stand before" Him, shall appear, shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God . . . to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness . . . to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.[30]

It could be that a person who struggles with shame and unwanted sexual behavior would read Lewis and not see an invitation to life, but would believe more deeply still in his fundamental failure to overcome the poison of sin. "What does he think of me?" Ben would say, "He thinks of me as a total failure."

Ben's belief needs to change. His shame-filled belief that God does not, indeed cannot love Him, needs to be unlearned, to become "unknown." He needs to be healed by an experience

[30] There's great debate between the two ideas presented by C.S. Lewis and A.W. Tozer. It appears that they are in contradiction but in reality, are more complementary than anything else. What God thinks of me is determinative; what I think of Him is to become more and more an echo. Tozer would agree that it is what God thinks of us that is foundational and determinative. But what we think of God shapes our experience of His love, grace, and power. My personal bend is to lean toward the thoughts of C.S. Lewis as expressed in *The Weight of Glory*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1941), 21.

of God's amazing grace. The place of "unlearning" on the conversion journey is the portal to knowing the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and being set free. It is here where a God of love can be explored, and discovered. The words of Rabbi Rami Shapiro reverberate, "The God of your understanding is just that: the God of your understanding. What you need is the God just beyond your understanding."[31] What we need is a greater understanding of Jesus.

Believing Jesus

The only way beliefs can be healed is through Jesus, our Wounded Healer.[32] Men like Ben who come to our church believe in God and the Apostle's Creed. But most of them would also recite the prayer of another man in Scripture, one who also struggled with his own belief while desperately seeking the healing of his son. It is recorded in Mark 9.24, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

This is the heart cry of those who want to believe that God is not punitive. It is the heart cry of those who want to live in freedom, and who believe the "abundant life" is possible, but have become so discouraged that they cannot fully believe. The prayer is uttered again and again, "I believe. Help me in my unbelief." In the context of our individual and communal struggle as a church we have begun to articulate the prayer differently, "I believe. Heal my unbelief."

The men in our church believe Jesus is God. They believe in the Divinity and the Supremacy of Jesus. We often recite Colossians 1.15-20 emphasizing the nature of Christ.

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[31] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2020), 27.

[32] A description of Jesus as Wounded Healer will be discussed in the following chapter. Henri Nouwen popularized the idea of the wounded healer. His work has helped shape pastoral leaders in knowing and naming their own wounds and in turn living and loving from their woundedness to be healers to other wounded souls. Nouwen writes, "The man who can articulate the movements of his inner life, who can give names to his varied experiences, need no longer be a victim of himself, but is able slowly and consistently to remove the obstacles that prevent the spirit from entering. He is able to create space for Him whose heart is greater than his, whose eyes see more than his, and whose hands can heal more than his." *The Wounded Healer* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 38.

> Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in Jesus all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Jesus and for Jesus. Jesus is before all things, and in Jesus all things hold together. And Jesus is the head of the body, the church; Jesus is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything Jesus might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus, and through Jesus to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through Jesus' blood, shed on the cross.[33]

Most men in our church believe every word of every verse in this text. There is little struggle to hold fast to the truth of Jesus as God. The struggle comes in believing the two verses that directly follow.

> Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—[34]

It is here where the prayer is uttered again and again. "'Holy in His sight?' 'Without blemish?' 'Free from accusation?' 'I believe. Heal my unbelief.'"

One of the most fascinating and heartbreaking dynamics of this struggle is that Ben and men like him believe 1 John 4.8, "God is love." They believe 1 John 4.18, "There is no fear in love and perfect love drives out all fear." They believe the truth of Colossians 1.21-22, that they are "without blemish and free from accusation." The problem is they believe these verses are true for everyone else in the room. They acknowledge the truth in their head, but because of the power of shame, refuse to believe it is true for them personally. Believing it in their heads, they are unable to believe in their hearts.

[33] Colossian 1.15-20.
[34] Colossians 1.21-22.

In his opening comments to our class at Gordon-Conwell Seminary on "Paul's Letters" Dr. Michael Jennings said, "The reason Paul is writing these letters to the churches is to ensure they have a right view of Jesus."[35] A right view of Jesus changes everything.

To move from a punitive belief about God to a grace-filled belief about Him requires unlearning (unknowing) a wrong view of God and moving toward knowing a right view of Him in the person of Jesus. All Scripture gives view of Jesus; and the four Gospels provide the fullest picture in one large section, eighty-nine chapters of Biblical text. But there is one place in particular, Dane Ortlund argues, where Jesus Himself opens up His very heart,

> We learn much in the four Gospels about Christ's teaching. We read of his birth, his ministry, and his disciples. We are told of his travels and prayer habits. We find lengthy speeches and repeated objections by his hearers, prompting further teaching. We learn of the way he understood himself to fulfill the whole Old Testament. And we learn in all four accounts of his unjust arrest and shameful death and astonishing resurrection. Consider the thousands of pages that have been written by theologians over the past two thousand years on all these things.
>
> But in only one place–perhaps the most wonderful words ever uttered by human lips—do we hear Jesus himself open up to us his very heart:
>
> Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)
>
> In the one place in the Bible where the Son of God pulls back the veil and lets us peer way down into the core of who he is, we are not told that he is "austere and demanding in heart." We are not told that he is "exalted and dignified in heart." We are not even told that he is "joyful and generous in heart." Letting Jesus set the terms, his surprising claim is that he is "gentle and lowly in heart."[36]

God in the flesh is gentle. God in the flesh is not harsh, domineering or judgmental. God is "gentle and lowly in heart." In Jesus and only Jesus can Ben and men like him find rest for

[35] Dr. Michael Jennings, *"The Letters of Paul,"* [Online lecture]. April 15, 2022. https://gordonconwell.instructure.com/courses/3842.

[36] Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 18.

their souls. This is Jesus who can be known. This is Jesus who offers us abundant life in the here and now, and eternal life in the future. "And when Jesus tells us what animates Him most deeply, what is most true of Him – when He exposes the innermost recesses of His being – what we find there is: gentle and lowly."[37] And then Ortlund poses the most staggering question, "Who could ever have thought up such a Savior?"[38]

Jesuit Priest Father Greg Boyle says, "The incarnation was necessary so God's love could become tender, to have the touch, feel, smell in the flesh."[39] God comes to our world not as an angry ruling tyrant but as a human infant. One who needs feeding and changing, swaddling and rocking. A child who needs care, who needs love. Ruth Haley Barton, in the *Act of Discipleship*, comments on the human vulnerability of Jesus later on in life, as He chooses to live in the context of friendship. "Some of Jesus' most human moments had to do with his poignant expressions of longing for companionship."[40] Jesus could have chosen a different way, a way where there was no need for others, certainly not friendship, or fellowship; instead He chose the way of kinship, the way of tenderness. Jesus chose to deliberately put Himself in a context where He could love and be loved by others. A context that would also mean His love could be rejected, even by His closest friends.

Jesus life began in vulnerability, was characterized all along by vulnerability, and ended in supreme vulnerability. As He entered into the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus asked His closest friends to join Him, not just to be with Him, but to pray for Him.[41]

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[37] Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, 19.
[38] Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, 19.
[39] Greg Boyle, *Morning Worship: Boyle: God Gives Tender Glances, Loves the Sound of our Voices.* The Chautauquan Daily website, accessed May 19, 2022. https://chqdaily.com/2018/07/morning-worship-boyle-god-gives-tender-glances-loves-the-sound-of-our-voices/.
[40] Ruth Haley Barton, *An Act of Discipleship* Transforming Center website, accessed May 22, 2022. https://transformingcenter.org/2017/04/holy-week-an-invitation-to-walk-with-christ-2/.
[41] Matthew 26.36-37.

> The dark night of Jesus' betrayal and execution began, ironically, with the kiss of a friend. The irony was that Jesus had given such priority to cultivating relationships with his disciples during his brief time here on earth and now this betrayal was taking place within that most intimate circle.[42]

Jesus chose vulnerability which inherently includes uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.[43] It is His vulnerability, not His invincibility that makes Him so compelling. Like the Spirit, Jesus is willing to be refused.[44] Like the Father, He is willing to be rejected.[45] Jesus comes into the world in tenderness making a way for us to know Him, and be known by Him, the God of love. The greatest act of vulnerability would be on the cross. It is here where He becomes sin and makes atonement for the world so that condemnation and judgment cease. It is here where God shows His ultimate love, not sparing His own Son. It is here where our hearts can now fully know the gentleness and vulnerability of Jesus. It is here where Jesus dies and rises to unify us with the Father and the Spirit. It is here where love is made manifest among us.

Healing My Beliefs

As a kid, I was steeped in legalism. My parents were pastors, and in our small denomination they were quickly moving up the ranks. My brother and I were taught to behave and perform. We were praised and rewarded when we did what was right, berated, and punished when we did not meet expectations.[46] Regularly my parents were invited to be special guests at

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[42] Ruth Haley Barton, *An Act of Discipleship*.

[43] Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead.* (New York, NY: Avery, 2015), 2.

[44] See 1 Thessalonians 5.19-22.

[45] See 1 Thessalonians 4.3-8.

[46] One of the most powerful moments of my Christian life was experienced just a few years ago as a participant in The Transforming Community led by Ruth Haley Barton (www.tranformingcenter.org). As was the communal practice we regularly shared testimonies regarding what we were learning and how we were growing. On this occasion, the topic was silence and solitude. Testimonies came from around the room. The gal sitting next to me stood and began to share her frustration in not knowing what to do in this time of silence and solitude. She testified, "I prayed and prayed asking God what book to bring, what music to listen to, what Scripture to read. I became agitated thinking I might miss the opportunity this space was affording me…And then God spoke to me, 'Amber, I don't have any expectations of you. I just want to be with you.'" It was as if God spoke directly to me, covering

a local church where mom would sing a solo and dad would preach a message. Many times my brother and I were trotted up front to read the Scripture or say The Lord's Prayer. That is until my mom's affair with another pastor was scandalously made public and we were unceremoniously kicked out of the church. Legalism trumped grace. My brother and I would later return to the denomination this time escorted by stepparents.

In early high school, our denomination held its form of membership classes, at the end of which we were enrolled as members or "soldiers." As a part of the class, we studied "The Doctrines of the Salvation Army." There are 12 Doctrines, but it was Doctrine #9 that was given the most attention. "We believe that continuance in a state of salvation depends upon continued obedient faith in Christ."[47]

This is where my struggle with the previously mentioned Colossians 1 became a reality. The earlier quotation on page 17 paused at verse 22. But the passage continues.

> But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— *if you continue in your faith*, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant[48]. (emphasis mine)

Our denomination believed the free gift of salvation could be lost. The only way it could be maintained is "if " faith was continued. Obedience was not only expected but demanded. *If* one could not obey and sin less, then hell was the eternal destiny. It was a terrifying way to live. God

years gone by and years to come. At that moment I heard him say, "Craig, I don't have any expectations of you. I just want to be with you."

[47] *The Song Book of The Salvation Army (*Verona, NJ: The Salvation Army Press, 1987), VI. For a review of all 12 doctrines and a robust explanation of each see *The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine* (London, England: Salvation Books, 2010).

[48] Colossians 1.23-24.

was akin to Santa Claus, "You'd better watch out/You'd better not pout/He sees you when you are bad or good so be good for good'ness sake."[49]

And yet the Christian life is more complex than that.

During the early stages of the recent pandemic, I was challenged by a friend to memorize and live into the truths of Philippians 2.12-13.

> Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.[50]

The emphasis of my friend was "working out my salvation." His charge to me was to use the newly found space in my calendar to write, specifically to write my story.

I set off with great enthusiasm to write America's next great novel, a story that would catapult me to teenage stardom. The first few chapters were written by the end of the second week and I excitedly sent them to my friend. His reply surprised me, and then stumped me. "Everyone knows your story. You don't need to tell it all in the first chapter. Move the major parts of your story around, throughout the book. It'll make people want to keep reading."

I must have read his response five times. I kept asking myself, "What are the major parts of my story?" I asked my wife, and then my kids, and then finally found myself in my counselor's office. Eventually, four themes emerged. Four themes of abuse: sexual abuse; emotional abuse; physical abuse; spiritual abuse.

I was shocked to realize how much I needed to unlearn – how many of my beliefs need to be healed. As I wrote I began to work out my salvation. Through tears, prayers, lament, anger, lust, failure, and sin I began to see my story differently. I began to write my story

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[49] John Fredrick Coots, *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* (Mount Vernon, NY: Leo Fiest, Inc., 1934).
[50] Philippians 2.12-13.

through the lens of gratitude.

One of the most poignant scenes in the fictional version of the story portrays an event at a youth camp, after the speaker taught about the Garden of Eden. In the episode, some teenage boys and their camp counselor are trying to work out their salvation.[51]

> The guys are getting into bed as I go through the motions, looking for my long sleeve flannel in my tiny closet. I'm awakened from my stupor by Lonny standing in the doorway. He doesn't say anything. He's just standing there. He has his hands in his pockets and for some reason he's wearing Jimmy's rosary beads.
>
> While going through my pile of clothes, I catch him looking over his shoulder out into the cabin and then back at me. He begins to speak softly, slowly, and deliberately. "What if it wasn't something you've done? What if it was something done to you?" He leans up against the door jam. The look on his face instantly sucks the life out of me.
>
> I pull out my flannel. I have one-eighth of a second to think of what to say and realize I don't even need that much time. God I know his pain. I can't ever forget it. I can feel it, even now. I look him in the eyes. "I am sorry, Lonny. I am so sorry." I sit on my bed and he falls onto it next to me. I slip my arm around him and hug him. His pain stirring him. I say it again touching his arm, "I'm so sorry, Lonny." Tears begin to stream down his face. The rest of his body is paralyzed. I say it again, "I'm so sorry, Lonny. I'm so sorry." Then he breaks.
>
> I don't say anything. I know not to. I just hold him. Soon enough I begin to wipe my face. All of this in Lonny somehow cracks something long calloused within me. It's a deeper shame being unearthed. "I'm so sorry," I say. I don't know if I'm speaking to Lonny, or Joanna, or Davis, or to God.
>
> Tears begin to form in my eyes. I squeeze my eyes closed as if to cut off the pain that is flowing all over me. When I open my eyes, I see Jimmy now kneeling in front of Lonny. Tears are running down his face. Booger is standing right behind him. A few of the other guys are now standing guard too. A couple guys are crying because their leader is hurting. Lonny looks up and sees them and goes back to sobbing.
>
> The front door opens and then closes. I assume one of my guys is making a run for it. I've learned these kids either are drawn to intimacy or freaked out by it. I'm about to send someone out to rescue my wounded camper when Pastor Wes looks over the guys at me. I'm startled to see him. I wait for him to come through the huddle of boys to help me. He just stands there behind them, looking around at the boys and then glancing back at me

[51] For context, the narrator is camp counselor John, loosely based on my story. Pastor Wes is based on our denominational youth pastor, Murray Flagg. The boys in the story are loosely based on some campers I met in the summer of 1986.

and Lonny. He nods at me and then closes his eyes and tilts his head back. He pushes up the sleeves of his sweatshirt and stretches his hands over my guys. Lonny begins to settle down. I whisper, “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.” I rock with him for a few moments. I look up again, certain Pastor Wes is going to do something. He stands silent for a few moments, looking over all that is happening. He puts his hands together in front of his slightly smiling face and slowly nods at me. Then turns back toward the door. I’m left alone in all of this hurt. All of it.

Lonny takes a few deep breaths. He’s beginning to settle down a little more. Outwardly, he’s almost quiet.

“You guys get back to bed,” I say to the boys crowded in the doorway. “Say a prayer for your boy...for all of us.” Lonny wipes his face with his dirty white T-shirt. Most of the guy’s head back to their beds. Jimmy and Booger don’t move. I catch Lonny’s eyes before he hangs his head again. “You okay, Lonny?”

He shakes his head. He wants to speak but can’t. He looks up at me and tries to smile. I hold him tighter and say, “Hey, man. It’s cool. I’ve got you. You’re safe here, you know?”

We are quiet, save the occasional gasp in trying to catch our breath. In this moment, more than any other moment, there is a peace. There is a raging war being fought right here for this kid’s soul, and there is a peace – a weird, sweet, calming, gentle quietness that holds the four of us completely together.

Lonny runs his fingers over the rosary beads and whispers, “It’s hell Counselor John.”

Booger speaks for the first time. He looks so respectfully at Lonny and asks, “What’s hell, ese?”

I look at Booger. His eyes are so full of tenderness and compassion. Tears begin running down his face. He wants desperately to understand. He kneels down next to Jimmy. Jimmy feels Booger’s presence in a new way and his tears start again. Lonny leans back, now fully against the wall. He looks at me and then looks away closing his eyes, trying to hold back the tears that come anyway.

“It is hell, Lonny,” I say. He wipes these new tears with his sleeve. He slowly looks up at me. I nod, “I used to think hell was this place where all the bad people go when they die, you know?” He almost smiles. “That’s not hell. Red devil running around like the Arizona State mascot, pitchfork in his hand, poking people, fire burning all over the place. That’s not hell.”

Booger nods in an uncertain agreement. Lonny is listening to me like I’ve never been listened to before. My tears now match Jimmy’s. I let them come without wiping them away. “This is hell, it’s innocence brutally taken. Hell is being broken, never to be whole again. Hell is being used and thrown away like a piece of trash. Hell is being told, ‘It’s

> our little secret and if you tell anyone, I'll hurt your little brother too.' That's hell. It's the loneliest place on earth."
>
> Lonny bursts into tears and falls into my arms. The other two boys now feeling the heaviness of the weight of his pain, mine too. They envelop us with their tears. Our cries fill the empty sky.[52]

I wept as I wrote those words two years ago. I am weeping now as I reread them. I so want to be able to write that today I am better and have it all figured out and I do not struggle with any of this anymore. I'm learning that a story is easier to write than to live.

The Psalmist writes,

> LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger
> or discipline me in your wrath.
> Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint;
> heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.
> My soul is in deep anguish.
> How long, LORD, how long?
> Turn, LORD, and deliver me;
> save me because of your unfailing love.
> Among the dead no one proclaims your name.
> Who praises you from the grave?
> I am worn out from my groaning.
> All night long I flood my bed with weeping
> and drench my couch with tears.[53]

These verses have described years and years of my life, including, and maybe more intensely since the writing of my story. Night after night I have groaned and flooded my bed with tears from the pain and consequences of abuse. A year ago, after another agonizing night of nightmares, I asked God for mercy saying, "God, I can't go on like this. I can't live like this. I don't need any more of your forgiveness. I want your help! Just fix me already!"

God's response came a few months later, "I don't want to fix you. I want to heal you."

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[52] Craig Bowler, *80 Miles* (Acworth, GA: Peppersauce Canyon Publishers, 2021), 45-46.
[53] Psalm 6.1-6.

The Nature of the Project

"At the heart of the gospel is the belief that our brokenness does not separate us from the love of God. It connects us."[54] This project is holistic in nature, meaning all five chapters are important. Each chapter has a specific purpose and an interdependent place in the project.

In the first three chapters I examine how our beliefs drive our behaviors, and pastorally reframe the gift of healing, including the healing of our beliefs. I argue that healing applies to all our beliefs and brokenness but the focus of this project is shame-filled beliefs and sexual brokenness. This project is built on the theological conviction that Christian are already healed, whole and holy in Christ *and* growing to live in deeper healing, wholeness, and holiness. Exploring this paradox, we examine the Scriptures to her what heaven believes about our brokenness, and beyond our brokenness, what heaven believes about the broken. Then we invite the reader to choose to believe Jesus.

Chapter Four begins with a survey of the men in our church to gain a better understanding of sexual brokenness in our context. The results of this survey are then used to add to an ongoing conversation with our lead shepherds and equippers about how best to engage men just as they are, right where they are. Surprisingly, church leadership makes a decision to include both men and women in the project. So, we invite a small group of men and women into a safe space to live into the truths presented in the first three chapters of this project.

Chapter Four includes the creation of a conversational small group curriculum that allows for a safe space to "work out our salvation" more deeply, a place where we can live out the beauty of the Gospel, and "confess [our] sins to each other and pray for each other so that [we]

[54] Stringer, *Unwanted*, 17.

may be healed."[55] Great care has been given as we use this conversational curriculum to shepherd our community into mutuality and maturity, which is one of Sanctuary's core values.[56] We desire the curriculum and the community to foster deep meaningful relationships, believing that the participants will continue to journey together after the curriculum concludes.

In Chapter Five, we evaluate how the curriculum was received, and summarize areas of celebration, and continuing growth. We will continue to provide ongoing space and places for men and women to journey together, including the opportunity to think about how this project will impact not just the sexually broken, but their families, and our Faith Family. We trust this project will serve as an incubator and a catalyst for spiritual formation which leads to Christlikeness.

[55] See James 5.16.

[56] Craig Bowler, *A Growing Faith Family: Mutuality and Maturity.* (Acworth, GA: Sanctuary, 2021), 3.

CHAPTER TWO

A BRIEF THEOLOGY OF HEALING IN COMMUNITY

Confess your sins one to another and pray for each other that you may be healed.
James 5.16

Those who really can receive bread from a stranger and smile in gratitude, can feed many without even realizing it. Those who can sit in silence with their fellow man not knowing what to say but knowing that they should be there, can bring new life in a dying heart. Those who are not afraid to hold a hand in gratitude, to shed tears in grief, and to let a sigh of distress arise straight from the heart, can break through paralyzing boundaries and witness the birth of a new fellowship, the fellowship of the broken.[1]
Henri Nouwen

Introduction

Reading Jay Stringer's book, *Unwanted: How Sexual Brokenness Reveals Our Way to Healing* was like entering a portal into a new understanding of freedom from shame and unwanted sexual behavior. In some sense, it was like being with Peter, Susan, Edmond, and Lucy as they were transported through the wardrobe into Narnia.[2]

Unwanted became the text source not only for this thesis-project but for a more magnificent understanding of a God who gave us the most incredible gift of sexuality and the invitation to live into it to fully. *Unwanted* calls forth honesty and curiosity in our darkest fear and then invites that darkness to be exposed and healed in community.

The role of healing in community will be the prominent feature of this chapter, which serves as both a literature review of reflections on community and the first of two chapters of

[1] Henri Nouwen, *Out of Solitude, Three Meditations of the Christian Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2004), 43.
[2] C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1950).

theological reflection. The formation of incarnational, confessional and diverse communities provides breadth and depth to our understanding of God's grand design of personhood in relationship, as well as a pathway for healing.

This chapter will also review how a healing community creates a place and space for "story." The initial emphasis will be on reading Scripture incarnationally, finding our own story as a part of God's Great Love Story. The work of Curt Thompson will help uncover the healing that happens when we share our story with others, ultimately learning not only to tell our story but to live it in the context of community.

Jesus and Community

This chapter must begin with Jesus in community. The Gospels are packed full of examples of Jesus putting Himself in the context of community, a community which included outcasts, radicals, women, and the wounded. He could have chosen another way. Instead, He chose to model a life that would bring healing, wholeness, and holiness to the world.

As a human being, Jesus chose to live in community not only for the sake of those around Him, but for His own sake. One of the most poignant examples of this is found in the Garden of Gethsemane. But to understand that incident, one should listen to the reflection upon it in the letter to the Hebrews. The author writes,

> During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.[3]

There is only one moment in Scripture where Jesus exhibits this kind of prayer, "with

[3] Hebrews 5.7-10.

cries and tears to the one who could save him from death": in the Garden of Gethsemane. The closer to the cross Jesus moved, the more He recognized the suffering He would bear. But before the Garden Jesus never asked His disciples to watch and pray with Him like this.

> Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."
>
> Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."[4]

In the Garden Jesus enters into the full force of two of life's greatest mysteries: obedience and suffering. And to engage these mysteries He chooses to bring His closest friends. He chooses community. Here, Jesus learns obedience. Here, Jesus learns how to empathize with our weaknesses. Here, Jesus is strengthened to carry out the will of His Father, to endure "the cross, scorning its shame."[5]

Real Community for the Broken

Jesus has provided an incredible example of community for His followers, but for the last twenty years I would have rather preached about tithing than community. Honestly, I would have rather preached about any topic than community. I have been hurt by community. Truth is, I am still hurt by it. Nor was it just me who did not want to talk about community, our church did not want to talk about it either. We were people who had been hurt by community, hurt by those we had loved the most, and hurt by each other.

But community is God's idea, and it is His ultimate plan for creation. As Dallas Willard insightfully proclaims,

[4] Matthew 26.36-39.
[5] Hebrews 12.2

> The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving person, with Himself included in that community as its prime sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.[6]

"It is not good for man to be alone," God declares in Genesis 2.18, to which Tara Owens adds the following color and context.

> God, who is himself in perpetual community, sees the man's lack of connection to anyone else as something in need of correction. This should be stunning to us: not only is Adam living in Eden, in the garden of delight, he is in perpetual unbroken communion with Almighty God. He walks and talks with Him. And God still says there is something not good about this. Adam needs to be in community.[7]

Everyone needs community. The very nature of our humanity demands it, and apart from community we cannot reflect the fullness of God's image.

And those dealing with shame and unwanted sexual behavior are in desperate need of community, a community of wholeness and healing. Unfortunately, the evangelical church has often failed to provide such a community. As Jay Stringer explains:

> The overwhelmingly standard evangelical response to sexual brokenness has been to address it through the lens of "lust management," even declaring war against it. This approach has oversimplified and trivialized a far more complex issue within human sexuality. Efforts to eliminate lust will set us up to manage our sexual lives with a tourniquet. We spend the best years of our lives attempting to stop the flow of lust through darting our eyes from beautiful people, slapping rubber bands around our wrists when we have sexual thoughts, and asking accountability partners, in an attempt to stay vulnerable in community, to keep account of what erotic websites we've visited. I think we can all agree this cannot be what God had in mind for sex and community. The reality that more than half our faith leaders and the great majority of Christians view pornography should indicate that our strategies have proven ineffective. Our inability to succeed in purity only compounds our pain.[8]

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[6] Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ's Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 95.

[7] Tara Owens, "The Courage to Connect" *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* (Atlanta, GA: Richmont Graduate University Press, 2015), 4.

[8] Jay Stringer, *Unwanted: How Sexual Brokenness Reveals Our Way to Healing* (Colorado Springs. CO: NavPress, 2018), 26.

Helping someone move into healing relationships, however, cannot be forced or filled with false promises. The challenges of a shame-filled person who exhibits unwanted sexual behavior are deep and complex, and for a wounded person to even begin to desire relationship requires the work of the Spirit.

It also requires a genuine healing community, where people can be loved and accepted as they are while being helped to become who they want to be. Judith Hougen writes a fascinating article about the interplay between community and brokenness in which she contends that most Christian communities hold no place for the truly broken.

> We dare not amidst weaknesses, confess our limitations, embrace our poverty. In short, we dare not be broken. Hiding its sin and weakness under a veneer of pretense, the pious fellowship, fueled by the myth of competence is not a community as much as it is a collection of pretenders. It is incapable of genuine relating. The one hope for true community with fellow believers and with God is to exchange the fellowship of the pious for a fellowship where we can be known as both saint and sinner, where our failings and poverty are not excluded at all costs from the fellowship but are an intimate part of it. Only in such an atmosphere can authentic community flourish. This is the fellowship of the broken.[9]

The bottom line is that church has not been a safe space for many broken people. It has not held healing power. In too many cases those alone in their sin, or alone in the sin that was committed against them, choose to stay alone because the community has not been willing to accept the broken. Tragically, as Bonhoeffer warns, "he who is alone with his sin is utterly alone."[10]

According to survey research cited by Stringer, "59% of people struggling with unwanted sexual behavior did not feel as though they had anyone to talk to (to a great or very great

[9] Judith Hougen, "The Community of the Broken: Finding Intimacy Through Poverty" *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* (Atlanta, GA: Psychological Studies Institute, 2005), 57.

[10] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Community* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Book, 1993), 110.

extent);"[11] and only 20% "diligently pursued someone they could talk to when they were struggling with sexual behavior."[12] This means most people struggling in a church believe they do not have anyone to talk to. They are utterly alone.

Nevertheless, it is the healing power of community that compels me to continue to shepherd His sheep back to this God-created context. I still believe community is essential because it is the one place that grows our capacity to give and receive love. Stringer again:

> The paradox of relationships is that they are the context of our greatest harm but also of our deepest healing. Author Harville Hendrix said it this way: "We are born in relationship, we are wounded in relationship, and we can be healed in relationship."[13]

But when someone has been wounded by community or lived life in isolation it takes strength to walk in the door. As Tara Owens says, "It takes courage to show up, to trust this is God's intention for redemption in this world, and to pursue connectedness when isolation would seem easier."[14] So, when a shame-filled or sexually broken person enters community for the first time, or reengages community, I will sometimes comment on the heroic nature of simply showing up. Often, I will play the song, "All My Favorite People."

> All my favorite people are broken
> Believe me
> My heart should know
>
> Some prayers are better left unspoken
> I just want to hold you
> and let the rest go
>
> All my friends are part saint and part sinner
> We lean on each other
> to rise above
>
> We're not afraid to admit we're all still beginners

[11] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 320.
[12] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 320.
[13] Stringer, *Unwanted*, 273.
[14] Tara Owens, "The Courage to Connect" *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* (Atlanta, GA: Richmont Graduate University Press, 2015), 5.

We're all late bloomers
When it comes to love[15]

Community is healing and redemptive. But it requires work. It requires walking through the door time and time again. As Mary Yearkes says, "Healing does not just naturally happen over time. We must actively participate in the healing process, carving out space in our schedule to tend to our emotional pain and woundedness in God's presence."[16]

Community is a place and space where God can meet us afresh and anew. There is something that can happen in community that cannot happen anywhere else. While it is true that God can simply heal someone with a word, it is more common for God to use people to heal people. "In that healing space of community, we can more easily be formed into Christlikeness by the Spirit."[17] Without it, we are lost.

> Richard Rohr argued that the most damaging aspect of someone's life is not his or her failure but being disconnected from others. When we disconnect from community and our Maker, the inevitable fallout will be lives that wither and rot. The distinction is paramount for you to understand: You do not wither and rot because of your sin; you wither in sin because you are disconnected from the Vine.[18]

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[15] Linford Detweiler and Karen Bergquist, *All My Favorite People Are Broken*, (Ariose Music/Scampering Songs Publishing ASCAP, 2010.)
[16] Mary Yerkes, "Inviting God In: Opening the Door to the Messy and Miraculous Process of Inner Healing Prayer" *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* (Atlanta, GA: Richmont Graduate University Press, 2012), 49.
[17] Jan Johnson, "Contagious: The Surprising Things That Make Community Transformational" *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation*, Atlanta, GA: Richmont Graduate University Press, 2015), 21.
[18] Stringer, *Unwanted*, 330.

Community for the Unwanted

"The longer our unwanted sexual behavior persists unaddressed, the more likely it is that we will feel unwanted as well."[19] When I first read these words from Stringer, they stopped me in my tracks, because I know what it feels like to feel unwanted. I have traced my wounds back to abuse, and I know I am healed from the sin, and have sought to forgive those who sinned against me. Yet there is still, at times, a nagging feeling of being unwanted. Community is the last place a person who feels unwanted wants to be.

I have had the privilege of being in ministry with some of the best people on the planet. Ryan is one of my favorites. We met in Seminary and later I was honored to lock arms with him ministering to students and their families in a local church. But when Ryan's marriage was coming apart, he and his wife moved to their hometown for support and care. Not long after the move, they divorced. A while ago Ryan sent me this letter.

> I had a really sh**marriage. Some of it was my fault . . . some of it wasn't.
>
> My son is a beautiful boy who is struggling with controlling his temper and showing empathy. He and I are doing our best to love and serve each other. Not every day is perfect, but I'm trying really hard to be a dad that lets him know he is loved by God and me…
>
> I'm dating a 41-year-old recovering heroin addict named Anna who has been clean for fifteen years. She has two really cool kids that I love. She is beautiful and tells me often that she loves me, and I can tell by the way she looks at me that she means it. It is a wonderful thing to have common ground, intimacy, and trust with another person. She doesn't just need me; she wants me, too. She enjoys hanging out with me, and when we fight, issues are met head-on and we fight fair…
>
> It really sucks to always be needed but never wanted. It's the loneliest place on earth, I think.[20]

[19] Stringer, *Unwanted*, 24

[20] Ryan Young, email correspondence, received May 17, 2020. Used by permission.

Ryan knows what it is like to be wanted, and he knows what it is like to be unwanted. I cannot overstate how powerful this dynamic is in many men. The power could be attributed to personality types, certain Enneagram numbers, or pastor kids, but I believe it is a universal truth regardless of our sexual brokenness. Every person desires to not just be needed but wanted.

By nature, men are needed. In the creation narrative Adam is called to, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."[21] He then is called to "work and take care of" the Garden of Eden.[22] God gives him a task and creation needs him to fulfill it. So there is nothing inherently wrong with being needed.[23] It is part of the way men are designed. But to be wanted, not for a specific purpose, not solely as a provider or protector, but as a human soul, simply because you exist is the greatest gift another human can give.[24] And community is a place where we learn that we are wanted by others just as we are, right where we are; and from there we can begin to explore the notion that maybe, just maybe God wants me too.

Love Over Law in Community

The goal of community must be Christlikeness. The goal cannot be getting people into accountability groups, Bible studies, or even baptism. It also cannot be finding a group of people

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[21] Genesis 1.28

[22] See Genesis 2.15

[23] Ruth Haley Barton speaks about the desire for ministry leaders to be needed. She quotes Henri Nouwen, "In order to be of service to others, we have to die to them. We must die to needing those we serve in order to survive. We can love the sheep and serve them and be committed to them; we can be vulnerable with them and receive from them the gifts that God has given them. But our ability to survive and to have our (very legitimate) human needs for identity, calling, approval, belonging and worth met must come from the richness of our own intimacy with God cultivated in a balanced rhythm of solitude and community." Ruth Haley Barton, "Solitude and Community" *Beyond Words.* Transforming Community website, accessed June 7, 2022. https://transformingcenter.org/2011/08/part-2-solitude-and-community/.

[24] Anecdotally, I've sat with several men over the years who have confessed to physical or emotional affairs. The one consistent dynamic in those stories is the deep sense of being wanted by another.

who understand all the nuances of sexual brokenness. It must be about being transformed into the image and character of Christ.[25] Scott Hubbard writes,

> As long as we value a dream community over Christlikeness, we will unwittingly work to destroy whatever community we join. But if we value Christlikeness over even our dearest dreams of community, then every slight, every peculiarity, every conflict, and every sin will become an opportunity to become more like the glorious Head of this body.[26]

John the Beloved places a high value on relational love. In his Gospel and subsequent letters, John continually points to the God of love. In 1 John 4.18 he writes, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."[27]

In the Garden of Eden, it was the recognition of nakedness that first caused fear. Adam had been naked his whole life, but at the fall, his eyes were opened. Adam, who once had a perfect relationship with God, is now afraid of God, afraid of Eve...he is even afraid of himself. "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."[28]From that moment, fear became a consequence of sin.

But in the Gospel, God has made a way for us to live and love in community without fear. As John the Beloved invites,

> Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

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[25] 2 Corinthians 3.18.

[26] Scott Hubbard, *Let Your Dream Church Die: How Discontentment Destroys Community* Desiring God website, accessed June 2, 2022. https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/let-your-dream-church-die.

[27] 1 John 4.18.

[28] See Genesis 3.7-10.

> This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.
>
> God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.[29]

"Perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment." The fear of punishment looks different for each person—fear of hell, fear of rejection, fear of being left, fear of not being enough, the fear of being exposed. But the root cause is the same: shame. And for those struggling with unwanted sexual sin, sexual brokenness causes more shame-induced fear than any other area of life. But fear does not have to win. We are invited by John to live in Christ's community of love which casts out fear.

To live in this community of healing love, however, we must move away from law-based accountability and move toward loving mutuality. We are on this journey together, walking side by side for the sake of being conformed to the image and character of Christ. Stringer offers this clear distinction as foundational truth.

> God's design for sexual transformation is about a connection to love, not the fear of wrath. Shame aims to convince us that our unwanted behavior must be stopped before we can connect to others. Nothing could be more counterproductive. We connect so that we can heal.[30]

In the past, I would have been inclined to create accountability groups for people struggling with shame that comes from unwanted sexual behavior. But reading *Unwanted* opened my eyes to a more deeply transformative truth. Stringer's research shows that mere

[29] 1 John 4.7-21.

[30] Stringer, *Unwanted*, 331.

accountability is not an effective tool for healing. Accountability may sometimes modify behavior, but it does not bring healing to sexual wounds.

> Ask most millennials about their experiences with accountability in the church and you will typically get a smirk or a look of worry. An accountability partner was essentially there to have a front-row seat to the "bad" sexual things you did in your life. Accountability became a form of Christian voyeurism.[31]

It is not only millennials who have grown weary of accountability groups. It is anyone who has believed that accountability is all that is needed to change behavior, myself included. But most accountability relationships fail to set people free, and Stringer suggests why.

> The reason most relationships of accountability fail is that a person attempts to regulate the other's behavior without understanding the wider story of struggle in that individual's life. Consider this example: Will software alert you to the reality that when your spouse gets promoted at work, you, in your envy, become drawn toward a deeper involvement in pornography or an affair? Have church communities trained accountability partners to recognize that a person's unwanted sexual behavior may in fact be a repetition of early childhood sexual abuse? For this to change, your task is to invite your community to turn from the policing of bad behavior to setting a stage for transformation.[32]

Accountability can be one healing dynamic of community, it cannot be the primary purpose or goal. When accountability emphasizes the mutuality in a growing relationship with Christ as primary and then allows for mutual participation rather than behavior management transformation can flourish.

There are other areas in the evangelical church that have fostered the idea of law over love, accountability over healing relationships. The "purity movement" in the 1990s, for example, tended to promote a theology of sexuality that is misguided and stunted. These movements framed sexuality as a struggle between pure and impure behavior. The

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[31] Stringer, *Unwanted,* 326.

[32] Stringer, *Unwanted,* 327.

communicated goal was to stay sexually pure and avoid all areas of temptation. Purity would please God and deliver access to a healthier sex life once married. Stringer helps us once again.

> A major point of the Gospels is to show that efforts to purify oneself are not only pointless but also destructive to those most likely to be condemned as impure by the religious establishment. Jesus is ferocious with the experts on the law and lays into them for the additional burdens they place on the most vulnerable. In Luke 11:46, he replies to the religious establishment, "You experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them." Those struggling with unwanted sexual behavior do not need to be further loaded down with condemnation for their inability to reach purity. When purity culture becomes synonymous with surveillance culture, it must be seen as bordering on heresy…If you are a Christian, you must remember that the issue of purity has already been addressed once and for all in the death of Jesus.[33]

One last area of fear that must be respectfully noted is what is commonly known as the "Billy Graham Rules." The Rules were shaped in 1948, while Billy Graham conducted evangelistic meetings in Modesto, California. Through a series of conversations about ministry life and its challenges, Graham's team resolved to uphold the highest standard of biblical morality and integrity. In his autobiography *Just As I Am*, Billy Graham went into detail about the resolutions these men made in terms of financial integrity, sexual morality, publicity, and partnership with the local church. Their resolutions became known as "The Modesto Manifesto."[34]

The second rule regarding sexual morality has garnered much attention in the public square. Graham describes the rule this way,

> The second item on the list was the danger of sexual immorality. We all knew of evangelists who had fallen into immorality while separated from their families by travel. We pledged among ourselves to avoid any situation that would have even the appearance of compromise or suspicion. From that day on, I did not travel, meet, or eat alone with a woman other than my wife. We determined that the Apostle Paul's mandate to the young pastor Timothy would be ours as well: "Flee ... youthful lusts" (2 Timothy 2:22, KJV).[35]

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[33] Stringer, *Unwanted*, 329.

[34] Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (HarperCollins Worldwide and Zondervan, 2007), 128–129.

[35] Graham, *Just As I Am*, 128.

Billy Graham and his ministry changed the world forever. The Kingdom of God advanced as Billy Graham and his team followed Christ. But in the matter of men and women, Graham appears to have set up a structure based on fear.

There is a dynamic difference between living "in the fear of God" and living in fear. Many who were raised with the "Billy Graham Rules" and the culture of the purity movement missed the fullness of God expressed in sexuality. Relationships with women were inhibited as Graham's "rules" taught how to live in the fear of God but not how to live in the freedom that Jesus came to bring.[36]

Instead of being arrested by rules that restrict us, keeping us from seeing and knowing the Triune God because we have disconnected from part of His body, why not develop rules that bring us life? Why not become different kinds of people—people whose choices accurately reflect the will and the ways of God, people who live in the reality that "up there has come down here" in all aspects of our being and doing? This, I believe, is part of the beloved community.

Mutuality in Community

One of the best description of mutuality or "mutual help" in relationship is found in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius. "It means that I will only know God in entering the life of another and they in me, exquisitely mutual."[37] With Christlikeness being the goal of community, how does a community become a mutual place of healing and wholeness? How does one engage

[36] Anecdotally, I have been in full-time ministry for 30 years. Every ministry I've served has kept and enforced this second rule of the Modesto Manifesto. To this point in my life, I've never ridden alone in a car with a woman colleague.

[37] Greg Boyle, *The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness* (New York, NY: Avid Reader Press, 2021), 199.

others as a wounded healer in the midst of shame and unwanted sexual behavior? Stringer helps us answer these important questions with a clear starting point.

> Communities are at their best when they create space for individuals to explore the many reasons that connection has been so difficult. In this way, connection is an invitation, not a dogmatic demand in order to have a proper standing before God. Remember, relationships are the primary place of wounding in people's lives.[38]

Healing communities are formed by an invitation to connect for the purpose of a communal growth toward Christlikeness. The power of the connection lies in the mutuality of relationship. The season of the older, more mature believer downloading all his spiritual expertise to the immature sinful soul is passed. If communities are not entered into for the mutual well-being of each soul, the community will not likely be a place of healing.[39]

Groups that are affinity-based, or formed by season or stage of life, may also inhibit the full healing power of community. Ruth Haley Barton notes, "One of the limits of affinity groups is that there just isn't enough 'otherness' to call forth anything new. If we don't venture outside our comfort zones, trusting that the stranger God has brought into our lives has something for us

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[38] Stringer, *Unwanted*, 331.

[39] My favorite story of mutuality comes from Father Greg Boyle. It's a story I resonate with on a deeply personal level. The story is recorded this way, "Dreamer is a Homeboy who got in and out of trouble in his 20s. He has a dangerous sense of humor, Boyle said. Dreamer would get a job and then gravitate to vague criminality, like selling and using drugs.

When Dreamer finally decided to enter recovery, he needed a job and Boyle found him one with Gary, who owned a vending machine company. Dreamer started working there the next day.

Two weeks later, he was back in Boyle's office. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a paycheck.

"Damn, G, this paycheck makes me feel proper," Dreamer said. "You know who I have to thank for this job, don't you?"

Boyle looked pleased with himself and said, "Who?"

"Well, God, of course," Dreamer said. "You thought I would say you."

They laughed about it and Dreamer said, "If we were living in Genesis times, God would have struck down your ass by now."

"I was not sitting there as provider, and he was not sitting there as recipient," Boyle said. "We had entered mutuality." The Chateauquan Daily, *"Morning Worship: See the Unbearable Beauty in Your Life, Choose Joy."* July 20, 2018, accessed July 4, 2021. https://chqdaily.com/2018/07/morning-worship-see-the-unbearable-beauty-in-your-life-choose-joy-fr-greg-boyle-says/

we, too, will never even know what we're missing."[40] The Body of Christ is made up of many parts.[41] Each part is crucial to the vibrancy and vitality of healing communities. When a certain "part" is missing, or when the Body is divided, it is literally "dismembered." Healing comes to a soul when Christ's Body is fully and freely expressed.

In a recent survey by the Barna Group researchers found that intergenerational friendships are not just helpful in connecting with other men but can have a transformative overflow effect on families.

> Friendships, especially intergenerational friendships tend to correlate with greater overall relationship satisfaction. Practicing Christian men who report having intergenerational friendships with both older and younger men are nearly twice as likely to be very satisfied in their relationships with their child (54% vs. 30%) and in their marriage (64% vs. 54).[42]

Conversely, research shows the same need for younger people to be with older people. In 2018 The Pinetops Foundation funded a research project that focused on the reasons young people leave the local church. Their research, formalized in a report called "The Great Opportunity," estimates that 40 million young people who have been raised in Christian homes will leave the church by 2050. *40 million.* That is staggering.

Through our own lens here at Sanctuary, we see many kids leave the church when they enter college or become young professionals. The research presented in "The Great Opportunity" identifies one principal dynamic that is critical in keeping and nurturing kids in their faith. It is simple: connection to a parent or an older adult. The greatest influence in the life of a child is not the child's peers or culture or social media; it is the presence of a parent or other parental

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[40] Ruth Haley Barton, "Eastertide: Welcoming the Stranger" *Beyond Words.* Transforming Community website, accessed June 7, 2022. https://transformingcenter.org/2015/04/part-2-jesus-himself-drew-near-welcoming-the-stranger/.

[41] See 1 Corinthians 12.

[42] Bara Group, *Five Essentials to Engage Today's Men: Conversations Every Church Should Have About How Men Connect with Their Purpose, With Others, & With Their Faith.* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2020), 22.

figure. The report claims that "three major factors" most important in passing faith onto the next generation are:

> …highly engaged parents who care for their own faith and the faith of their children; other adults actively supporting youth in their walk with God; and calling youth into mission. For parents and churches, it is very clear: "You get who you are."[43]

However it is not just intergenerational dynamics that help people to heal and transform. When surrounded by people of different political persuasion, socio-economic background, gender or color, we have the opportunity to be confronted with new ideas and opinions which can also change us. Reggie Joiner, thought leader and CEO of Orange, a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to influence those who influence the next generation, shared how being exposed to the wider beauty of the Body of Christ has changed his life and the trajectory of his ministry.

> I was honored this week along with a host of other black and white pastors and leaders to travel to Memphis with Dr. Bernice King. We went to celebrate the legacy of her father, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
>
> The last few years I have been inspired by the love and hospitality of the staff and leaders at the King Center. This journey was the completion of a year-long vision called "Better Together" to encourage black and white pastors to begin conversations about race and social change.
>
> I have to admit tonight that my life has changed over the past few years. I am surrounded by a handful of young black leaders who have become personal friends, who are in this room tonight. Sam Collier, Latasha Morrison, Gerald Fadayomi, and Joseph Sojourner. They are all decades younger than me, but they are teaching me every day. I know I am becoming a better leader because of them. I wish when I was their age I understood what they understand. They represent a lot of other leaders in this room who are in their twenties and thirties who are committed to building a bridge in a culture that is becoming increasingly diverse. I know they will carry on this legacy long after we are gone.
>
> Here's the point. Because of these friendships.
> I don't process the news the same.
> I don't hear conversations the same.

[43] The Pinetops Foundation, *The Great Opportunity,* The Great Opportunity website, accessed June 7, 2022. https://www.greatopportunity.org/.

> I don't think the same.
> I don't see the world the same.
> I don't see politics the same.
>
> Here's what I hope this last year has taught us all: If we only learn from people who agree with us, we will be small-minded leaders. And if we only experience faith with people who believe like us, we will have a small definition of God.[44]

Side by Side Community

At the heart of every true community is love. It is not a feeling, affinity, season, or stage in life. It certainly cannot be fear. Love is what causes us to reach out to someone other than ourselves, someone different than ourselves, a "stranger." Jan Johnson says, "Love, which is the basis of community, is not a feeling, but an intention to walk alongside others, some of whom may drive us crazy."[45]

The worship gathering space at our church is set up in a circle. There is a round stage in the center of the room, with a large cross at the center. The worship team stands on the floor around the stage. Two large screens are on opposite sides of a long rectangular wall.

The stage is used primarily to proclaim God's Word. As I preach from the stage I can see every eye, and every eye can see me. When we sing, we can look across the room and see the faces of others singing. It is incredibly intimate. And it is incredibly uncomfortable for those who want to be anonymous.

[44] Reggie Joiner, *Better Together at Clayborn Temple* [sermon] Wednesday, April 4, 2018.

[45] Jan Johnson, "Contagious: The Surprising Things That Make Community Transformational" *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation*: Atlanta, GA: Richmont Graduate University Press, 2015), 22.

We have set up our worship gathering space this way on purpose. Our worship leader likes to point to Revelation 4 which indicates worshippers "around the throne."[46] We often say, "We want this time of worship to prepare us for heaven."[47]

We are intentional in the way we sit in small groups too. It is normal for us to sit at round tables, but in almost all our small group gatherings, we intentionally include time for people to sit side by side facing the cross. Early on we were influenced by Jan Johnson as she commented on The Four Loves by C.S. Lewis.[48]

> *Eros*, he says, is represented by two people looking at each other. At first, it's novel to meet people we don't know and we notice things we like about each other. After a while we notice things we don't like or may even become bored. But *phileo* is represented by two people sitting side by side, looking forward together at the same thing. Our focus is not so much on each other, but that thing we look at together. In this case, Christ. As you and I focus on Christ together, you may notice things I don't notice and point them out to me. I'm glad because I needed to hear what you see. I appreciate you so much! As Christians, we are looking together at the story of God, the love of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit here on earth."[49]

On more than one occasion people find themselves uncomfortable with the intimacy of sitting in this kind of posture. Some who visit for the first time leave halfway through a worship gathering; and when asked the response is something akin to, "this is really weird."

And yet, I hear time and time again, "It's the intimacy, the shared love that happens in community that I knew I needed, but didn't know how much I needed it." Jan Johnson summarizes the feelings of many at Sanctuary through her own experience in a similar community.

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[46] See Revelation 4.1-11

[47] Our "church in the round" was also influenced by being with a staff member and his wife in their home as the wife battled cancer. As heaven approached, this family wasn't able to come to church so we decided to bring church to them. A number of us came with guitars and I brought the elements for communion and my Bible for a devotion. We all sat in a circle in their living room. We commented to one another, "We're all in this together. This feels a lot like church." When we planned our gathering space in our church we did so with that posture in mind.

[48] C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1960).

[49] Jan Johnson, "Contagious", 23.

> Those receptive, understanding faces became the faces of God for me. They communicated grace accepting me amiably, and their encouragement somehow equipped me to change. This set me up to start seeing God continually inviting me into a life of fullness and freedom.[50]

In some sense, the people who sit by side serve as mediators. They become people who by their very presence quench the guilt and shame of the broken. Grace and forgiveness begin to overwhelm pain and aloneness. Grief and sadness are wrapped up in a blanket of faith and hope. The more this experience is demonstrated and becomes reality with one another, the more ready one is to experience God. The community, "the Body of Christ," becomes the manifest presence of Christ sitting side by side. Tish Harrison Warren shares her own need to live in her story in the context of community.

> Unkind and condemning thoughts tell me that God's love is distant, cold or irrelevant, that I must prove myself to God and other people, that I am orphaned and unlovable, that God is tapping his toe, impatient with me, ready to walk out on me. These thoughts are loud enough that I need a human voice telling me, week in and week out, that they're lies. I need to hear from someone who knows me that there is grace enough for me, that Christ's work is on my behalf, even as I'm on my knees confessing that I've blown it again this week.[51]

Incarnational Community

Eugene Peterson talks about Scripture and story interchangeably. He also recognizes the significant place story has had in our world since the beginning of time. We are a narrative people, with a "narrative hunger."[52] Story helps us make sense of the world. Peterson writes,

> The story that is Holy Scripture invites us into a world of God's creation and salvation and blessing, God in human form in action on the very ground on which we also live, an incarnational *story*, that is, a flesh-and-blood story; a story worked out in actual lives and places (not in abstract ideas or programs or inspirational uplifting anecdotes), but a Jesus

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[50] Johnson, *Contagious,* 23.

[51] Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 58-59.

[52] Eugene Peterson, *As Kingfisher's Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God formed by the Word of God*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2017), 220.

> *story* in which we recognize the action of God in the everydayness of a local history in our stories, a sacramental story.[53]

When we read Scripture in our gatherings we often encourage people to read it incarnationally. We say, "find yourself in the story. Where do you most resonate with what is being said, or heard? Where do you see yourself, or where do you not see yourself?"[54]

In his last message to his church at Menlo Park Presbyterian, Pastor John Ortberg said, "Life is not a problem to be solved, but a story to be lived."[55] We all have a story. Our story begins long before we enter the world and continues long after we leave it. We have a say in our story as do those around us, and those far off. As in most love stories, there is an antagonist, the evil one, and there is a triumphant protagonist, the God of Love, who is also known as the "Author and Perfecter" of our story.[56] In the end our story is perfected. It is complete. But in the here and now it is a daily story to be lived, one sentence at a time.

Ruth Haley Barton talks about each person having a story that is part of a larger story God is writing. She says, "We are chapters in God's book; we are a word of God, too. Finding our story in God's Story–placing our stories in the context of the larger redemption story is an important point of integration for us as we find ourselves named, revelated, and known in the pages of Scripture."[57]

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[53] Peterson, *Kingfisher's*, 220.

[54] One of the exercises we've done in our men's gatherings is to encourage men to "find themselves in God's story." We encourage our men to pray and ask God to reveal to them where in Scripture they find themselves named, understood, and received. Where do you sense that "My story is being told here! What are the events that have shaped me? How is God authoring my life?" The exercise often stirs deep longings, and many times brings real freedom as men learn to accept their story as a part of God's larger story.

[55] John Ortberg, "John Ortberg Farewell" [sermon] August 2, 2020, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church,. accessed, June 7, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBacr86DICg.

[56] See Hebrews 12.1-2.

[57] Ruth Haley Barton, *Finding Ourselves in the Story*, [handout] Transforming Center, 2014.

A beautiful Biblical example here is the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.[58] Cleopas and his friend are trying to make sense of their story. Jesus, whom they loved and followed is dead, and now His body is missing. Jesus arrives in the midst of their story and comes alongside them. They are kept from recognizing Him as they walk and talk. Then Jesus tells them the story, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."[59]

Jesus gives His friends the greatest gift. He helps them place their story in the larger context of God's Great Love Story. Jesus honors their story, their confusion, and their inability to anchor their truth in the larger story. Those dealing with sexual brokenness must have the opportunity to tell their story, and then to have their story located in the larger context of God's Story. To share one without the other leaves a gap of instability and uncertainty. To share your story, and have it heard, and held, and then to place that story inside of God's story brings healing and wholeness. Ronald Rohlheiser says, "We need to remain on the road to Emmaus. The Stranger still stalks that same road. In His company, we need to discuss our doubts, discuss the scriptures and continually offer each other bread and consolation."[60]

When we enter community incarnationally, living out our own story, we also enter into a community which is collectively learning to live into God's Great story. The ability to accept our "in process" stories in light of God's perfectly completed story brings life and strength to live each day in His Presence, and in the presence of others.

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[58] See Luke 24.13-35.

[59] Luke 24.27.

[60] Ronald Rohlheiser, *On the Road to Emmaus* Ron Rolheiser OMI website, accessed June 7, 2022. https://ronrolheiser.com/on-the-road-to-emmaus/#.Yp92PxPMLPo.

Community of Confessors

Confession is not just a ritualistic practice. Confession leads to transformation. Much of this chapter focuses on the healing of wounds that have been inflicted by another. Yet, many people expressing shame in our communities are people who have hurt others. Regardless, sin must be confessed. It is imperative that we not shrug off sin or offer "cheap grace."[61]

Confession enables us and teaches us how to live in the healing Jesus has come to bring. Without confession, we miss the invitation to transformation. Curt Thompson reminds us,

> It is significant, then, that as we listen to someone expressing shame associated with truly wrong behavior that we not turn a blind eye to such real relational breaches, or, in the language of the biblical narrative, to sin. The confession of shame is not a shortcut for hard work, some easy way to being let off the hook. In John 21 Jesus did not ignore Peter's denials. He did not minimize the depth of the wound Peter inflicted. And like Peter, we need to take responsibility for our actions that prove to be disintegrating. Not because God wants us to grovel or rub our noses in our brokenness, but that we learn and grow in our awareness of just how important our lives and connections to others really are. Again, we take the significance of our relationships far less seriously than God does.[62]

In part, the hard work here is to recognize the hurt that has been inflicted by the power of sin—the hurt of the one who has been sinned against and the one who has sinned. To dismiss the hurt received, or the hurt inflicted only brings about further shame.

> It is equally true that in order for me to be liberated from the shame I carry, I need someone to be able to say to me, "You're right. You were wrong to have done this." I need to hear that my behavior was really as bad as I think, if not worse, while simultaneously sensing that the person I am confessing to is not leaving. Shame has the effect of coaxing us into pretending that sin is not as bad as it seems; for if it really is that bad, and I have to face it, it would be too much and I fear I would be overwhelmed. When someone seeks forgiveness for the wrong they have committed, we who have been wounded must be able to acknowledge the reality of the pain inflicted if forgiveness is to be real, and if the offender's shame is to be effectively healed.[63]

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[61] According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer "cheap grace" is the preaching or teaching of forgiveness that doesn't require anything of the listener. It doesn't require repentance, or confession, or any form of discipleship. See: Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. London, England: SCM Press Ltd, 1954, 35.

[62] Curt Thompson, *The Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2010), 182.

[63] Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, 183.

Unconfessed sin not only isolates but it hinders true relationship from forming and a real healing community to flourish. To fully live out James 5.16, "Confess your sin, one to another and pray for each other that you may be healed," there needs to be one who is willing to confess and one who is willing to receive a confession and to pray.

Storytelling in Community

In Curt Thompson's "The Anatomy of the Soul" he shares incredible insight regarding the healing power of telling our stories. He notes the work of Daniel Siegel.

> An important part of how people change–not just their experiences, but also their brains–is through the process of telling their stories to an empathic listener. When a person tells her story and is truly heard and understood, both she and the listener undergo actual changes in their brain circuitry. They feel a greater sense of emotional and relational connection, decreased anxiety, and a greater awareness of and compassion for others suffering.[64]

The healing that comes from telling our stories begins in the brain. Scientists are finding what Jesus has known all along: Being seen and known heals our broken stories. Judy Nelson Lewis shares an observation of what has happened to her husband as he has shared his story.

> My husband has shared his excruciating childhood with thousands of men at a local men's retreat. It still makes me wince sometimes to hear it, and people ask him how he can tell it again and again. Bob says telling his story keeps him sane, the repetition of God's redemption reminds him of his security, identity, and sense of self-worth. It dawned on me: Bob has literally been healing himself and feeding others by sharing his story among a kind and safe brotherhood. His brain has been re-wired for a new narrative.[65]

Telling our story in community allows for the honoring of a story, no matter how painful or how beautiful. It allows the storyteller to be seen, heard, and held. It allows the listener to

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[64] Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, xiii.

[65] Judy Nelson Lewis "On Beauty and Affliction" *Exhale*. Judy Nelson Lewis website, accessed May 23, 2022. https://mailchi.mp/1d2e2e962e92/a-friday-morning-thought-on-beauty-and-affliction-4194194?e=1e7530df13.

learn and understand a larger world than his own. What emerges is a greater awareness of God's ongoing work in the lives of each person.

In sharing their story of sexual brokenness one man said he related to Bathsheba. He said, "The most powerful man in the world called me to his palace. I had no choice…and the violence that ensued crushed me." Another said he related to Hagar. "I just had to get away. I was running for my life, or toward my death, I'm not sure which. I couldn't get past being 'forced.'" Another man talked about feeling like Moses in the wilderness—the spiritual geography of trauma for 40 years. He said, "And like Moses, I heard God say, 'I've never lost track of you. I know your story. I know you. Now that you know who you are…Go live your story. It's my story too.'"

Telling these stories in a healing community, where there is a mutual understanding of God's story allows for acceptance and enlarges our capacity to see the story through a healing lens. It is here, seeing the story through a healing lens, where real transformation begins. A story that is diminished or dishonored cannot be healed. Here, in this safe space of mutuality, freedom from the past and freedom for the future emerges. Margaret Silf describes what happens in this kind of community, "When we open our heart's experience to each other in trust, we are entering on holy ground where there is no place for comment, criticism, or correction, but only for a response of loving acceptance. On this holy ground God-in-you is listening to God-in- the-other."[66]

This kind of mutuality is rare and unique. Yet, it is the space that so many sexually broken people long to know and experience. The "narrative hunger" is the deepest craving of the broken. Frederick Beuchner writes profoundly,

> What we hunger for perhaps more than anything else is to be known in our full humanness, and yet that is often just what we also fear more than anything else. It is

[66] David Benner, *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 121.

> important to tell at least from time to time the secret of who we truly and fully are . . . because otherwise we run the risk of losing track of who we truly and fully are and little by little come to accept instead the highly edited version which we put forth in hope that the world will find it more acceptable than the real thing.[67]

The weariness that comes from accepting the "highly edited version" can lead to death—the death of hopes, and the death of dreams, the death of relationships, and ultimately thedeath of self. This is the plot of our antagonist: To lead us away from healing community, away from being fully known, and fully loved. Death is his desire. Jesus said, "The thief comes only tosteal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."[68] Jesus has come to bring healing, wholeness, and holiness.

Conclusion

In community, we are learning to tell a new story. It is not a made-up version or polished version of the story we have lived, but rather a story that is in every way full of the rawness of pain and beauty. It's not just a story we are telling, it's a story we are living, as Curt Thompson says, "A story of hope and creativity, one that scorns shame in order to imagine new minds, new possibilities and new narratives, all of which point to the new heaven and earth that we believe Jesus is surely bringing."[69]

If we are alive, we still have a story to tell, and more compellingly a story to live. We have an ability to learn the deeper truth of our lives as God sees it. That is the heart of a healing community. To believe about ourselves what God believes. Curt Thompson gets the last word of this chapter.

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[67] Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 74.
[68] John 10.10.
[69] Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*, 319.

> Shame does not get the final word in the story Jesus is telling—the one he invites us to participate in as coauthors, the one in which God's delight commands our attention far more than does our shame.[70]

[70] Thompson, *Soul of Shame*, 320.

CHAPTER THREE

MADE PERFECT, BEING MADE HOLY

For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.
Hebrews 10.14

Ask me not where I live
or what I like to eat...
Ask me what I am living for
and what is keeping me
from living fully for that.[1]
Thomas Merton

Introduction

This thesis-project is based on the conviction that because of what Jesus accomplished on behalf of all humanity, healing is available to broken in the here and now, right where we are, just as we are. We can be healed, made whole and holy in this life. Not only that, but one day in the future Jesus will bring about the ultimate healing of all things. We are at once healed, whole and holy, and growing in our healing, wholeness, and holiness. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts its succinctly, "For by one sacrifice (Jesus) has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Hebrews 10.14).

But this paradox needs biblical elucidation, as well as practical application to people's lives, especially those struggling with shame, brokenness and unwanted sexual sin. This chapter, therefore, will contend that healing comes through Jesus our Suffering Servant, whose death in our place and resurrection on our behalf enables those who believe to become a new creation, no

[1] Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: NY, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, reprint 2011), 100.

longer condemned, no longer dead in trespasses and sin, but alive to God and beloved by Him—whole, holy and healed. The ongoing nature of this healing, wholeness and holiness is then expressed in a maturing relationship with Jesus lived out in the context of healing community in the Church, after the pattern of the classic four-fold way.

Our Wounded Healer

Two key passages from the Old Testament, Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 61, set the foundation for a theology of healing and thus the ability to grow in holiness. These two prophetic texts give hope to all people of the saving love of God as most powerfully demonstrated in Jesus. First, Isaiah 53;

> He was despised and rejected by mankind,
> a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
> Like one from whom people hide their faces
> he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
>
> Surely he took up our pain
> and bore our suffering,
> yet we considered him punished by God,
> stricken by him, and afflicted.
> But he was pierced for our transgressions,
> he was crushed for our iniquities;
> the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
> and by his wounds we are healed.
>
> We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
> each of us has turned to our own way;
> and the LORD has laid on him
> the iniquity of us all…
> For he bore the sin of many,
> and made intercession for the transgressors.[2]

Isaiah 53, the prophet's fourth 'Servant Song,' proclaims the triumph God fulfilled through the mission of His servant. Significantly, suffering is at the root of it. For Christian

[2] Isaiah 53.1-12.

believers this enigmatic prophecy of a Suffering Servant is fulfilled in the death of Jesus, our Wounded Heater. As Ken Collins, quoting Walter Bruggeman, notes:

> It is important to recognize the commonality and parallel structure of Jewish claims and Christian claims…their common trust in a common God to do *something new…something new through suffering...*"this is a deeply inscrutable claim that speaks powerfully against common worldly insistences *that suffering is a dead end with no future"* (Brueggemann, 1998, 143-44; the author's original emphasis.)[3]

Eugene Peterson also sees this Suffering Servant Song shining light on the pain of the world and offering the only solution to rectify its brokenness. It is only through God's suffering that deliverance from sin can take place. In fact, that is the very essence of the gospel.

> This is the gospel way to deal with what is wrong with the world, deal with this multifaceted sin-cancer that is mutilating and disabling us. Variations on what is wrong are multiform: unbelief, missing the mark, evil, rebellion, transgression, willfulness, indifference, violence, arrogance, and on and on and on. But whether the wrong is intentional or inadvertent, the servant neither avoids it in revulsion nor attacks it by force of words or arms. Instead, the servant embraces, accepts, suffers in the sense of submitting to conditions and accepting the consequences. The servant personally takes the wrongdoer and the wrong to the altar of sacrifice and makes an offering of him or her on it. The servant says to his brothers and sisters, "Only God can save you. You don't think you can go to him? I'll go for you." Or, at least, "Let me go with you."[4]

Our Wounded Healer makes salvation possible by suffering with us and for us, bringing us to God. "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."[5] Suffering on the cross, Jesus makes healing, wholeness, and holiness possible for those who believe and receive His saving work.

In Isaiah 61, the prophet describes that saving work this way:

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[3] Kenneth Collins, *Wesley One Volume Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 610.

[4] Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation in the Ways Jesus is the Way*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 176-177.

[5] Isaiah 53.3

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair...[6]

With these very words Jesus begins His public ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth, declaring, "These words are fulfilled in your hearing."[7] In saying this Jesus not only identified Himself as the messianic Suffering Servant but also indicated what kind of salvation He came to bring—healing for the brokenhearted, light for the blind, freedom for the enslaved, good news for the poor, comfort for the mourning, and joy for the despairing. In other words, to make right everything that had gone wrong in God's world.

Salvation as Healing

Although not the only metaphor for God's salvation, healing is an important one for people living with sexual brokenness, or any sin-inflicted wounds for that matter. In fact, understanding the healing nature of salvation was personally transformational for psychologist Henry Could. It brought the worlds of psychology and theology together for him in a whole new way.

[6] Isaiah 61.1-11.
[7] See Luke 4.14-21.

> What I was seeing was that "salvation" was something more than I had ever thought. It was not just about getting saved from hell, or just having a relationship with God. While those were certainly true, the Bible was saying something else as well. The word "salvation" actually means "healing". Redemption meant that God was bringing us back to the way we were supposed to be, and "reconciling all things to himself." Salvation was in essence "healing all that had gone wrong…I can only express what happened over that time period in one way: I was born again, again. Everything that I had been observing that was bringing about healing was right there in the Bible all along. It was all there.[8]

Gary Moon and Eugene Peterson agree. It is an in aspect of early Christianity" Moon argues, "that has been all but lost to many Christians today." But listening to a podcast by pastor and Bible translator, Eugene Peterson, Moon hears him say, "You know, if there were one other word that could have been used for most translations of 'salvation,' it would be 'healing.'"[9]

And this is true. The Greek verb, *sozo,* often translated as "saved," can also be rendered as "healed" or "made well."[10] So, for example:

> She shall give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will be [*sozo* – heal/make well] His people from their sins. Matthew 1.21
>
> For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to be [*sozo* – heal/make well] the world through him. John 3.17
>
> Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be [*sozo* – heal/make well]. Acts 4.12
>
> If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be [*sozo* – heal/make well]. Romans 10.9
>
> For it is by grace you have been [*sozo* – heal/make well] through faith – and this is not from yourselves it is the gift of God. Ephesians 2.8

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[8] Henry Cloud, "Getting Saved" *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* (Atlanta, GA: Richmont Graduate University, 2012), 26.

[9] Gary Moon, "Healing Body and Soul" *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* (Atlanta, GA: Richmont Graduate University, 2012), 4-5.

[10] The Greek word *sozo* can be summarized as – rescue, liberate, keep from harm, preserve. In some cases, the word has further meaning 1. Preserve or rescue from natural dangers and afflictions. 2. Rescue or preserve from eternal death, from judgment, sin, bring salvation, bring to salvation. 3. Some texts will include both dynamics of meaning. For more description see Precept Austin word study, accessed May 8, 2022, https://www.preceptaustin.org/save_sozo_greek_word_study.

Though it may sound odd to some ears, Jesus never invited anyone to be "saved." Instead, He preached repentance and offered life, here and now in the Kingdom of heaven. As Dallas Willard taught, "The Gospel is a spiritual reality about a spiritual reality…the availability of life under the rule of the heavens."[11] Over one hundred times in the Gospels Jesus proclaims that He is making the Kingdom of the Heavens available,[12] inviting people to enter this new life through repentance and faith, a new life with includes the ongoing process of being conformed to the image and character of Christ as His disciple.[13] If salvation means anything, it is the new life entered into here and now, and then experienced forever.

One thing that is clear from even a cursory reading of the Gospels is the interplay between Jesus' "saving" and "healing." At the outset of Mark's Gospel for example, we find Jesus healing the sick, restoring the broken, finding the lost, and forgiving the sinner. In other words, we see the saving love of God being expressed in physical and spiritual healing as Jesus brings the kingdom of the heavens into this world through His presence. An episode in Jesus' hometown is revealing in that regard.[14]

> A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then

[11] Bill Gaultiere, The Kingdom of God, Soul Shepherding website, accessed May 27, 2022. https://soulshepherding.org/the-kingdom-of-god/.

[12] Gaultiere, The Kingdom of God.

[13] Benner would say conversion follows repentance. He defines conversion as "the lifelong transformational process of being remade into the image of God." *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality.* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 73.

[14] See also Matthew 9.2 and Luke 5.20.

> lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."[15]
>
> Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"
>
> Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"[16]

This text shows the power of Jesus to both forgive sins and heal diseases. In fact, His ability to heal is offered by Jesus as a sign that He also has the power to forgive sins. The unbelieving Jews consider Jesus guilty of blasphemy, since only God can forgive sins. But to those who believe, Jesus is demonstrating His power as the Divine Son of Man to heal both physically and spiritually—to save. [17]

It is Finished

One of the foundational truths of this thesis-project is that our beliefs drive our behaviors. While that is true, what must also be considered is what is true in the kingdom of the heaven.

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[15] In our Men's Ministry at Sanctuary we frequently use the term "mat carriers." We say we will all find ourselves in seasons of spiritual paralysis. Seasons where we need others to get us to Jesus. Mat carriers, who like in this story, take up a corner of the mat. Men who could be trusted in seasons of spiritual paralysis, and men who choose to put their trust in others. A mat carrier is a friend who would do whatever it takes to get you to Jesus. Collectively they become a community of healers who participate in saving love. This dynamic of community is huge for our ministry and the role of healing. It will be discussed further in the next chapter. I'll simply add here a reflection on this text from Warren Wiersbe. "We must admire several characteristics of these men, qualities that ought to mark us as 'fishers of men.' For one thing, they were deeply concerned about their friend and wanted to see him helped. They had the faith to believe that Jesus could and would meet his need. They did not simply 'pray about it,' but they put some feet to their prayers; and they did not permit the difficult circumstances to discourage them. They worked together and dared to do something different, and Jesus rewarded their efforts. How easy it would have been for them to say, 'Well, there is no sense trying to get to Jesus today! Maybe we can come back tomorrow.'" Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary Volume 1*. (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Victory Books, 1989), 115.

[16] Mark 2.1-12.

[17] James Edwards, *The Authority of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Louisville, KY: The Evangelical Theological Society, June 1994), 222.

What does heaven believe about sin? What does heaven believe about shame? What does heaven believe about healing and wholeness and holiness? In a sentence, heaven believes, "It is finished." While Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 61 proclaim the healing power of the Suffering Servant on behalf of His people, John 19.30 declares the final word: "Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.[18]" "*Téleios*—meaning "fully finished" or "brought to its end" or "perfect."[19]

Jesus' whole life pointed to this moment, for what happened on the cross became the single most important even in redemptive history. On the cross Jesus made atonement for the sin of the world, and from the cross He declared final victory over sin and death. The wrath of God was poured upon Jesus in our place, and the words of John the Baptist were fulfilled – "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"[20]

In the words of Martin Luther, God effected a "blessed exchange"—our sins for Christ's righteousness, Christ's righteousness for our sins. God the Father regarded His sin bearing Son as if he had lived a sinful life, and in return, He is able to regard every sinner who represents as if he had live Jesus' perfect life.

On the cross the reconciling work of restored relationship with God is finished. What Jesus did Jesus did completely justifies and redeems. His sacrifice makes a way for every person to be declared wholly righteous, and for Jesus to declare final victory over all our sins—past, present and future. Heaven believes it is finished, "For by one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."

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[18] John 19.30.

[19] *The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon*, Bible Study Tools website, accessed May 23, 2022. https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/teleios.html.

[20] John 1.29.

The writer of Hebrews even declares that the cross defeated the power of shame: "For the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."[21] Jesus does not allow shame to have the last word. So now, because of Jesus' sacrifice, God is please with every one of His sons and daughters, including the sexually broken.

The journey of being made holy formally begins when in faith we receive the atoning work of Jesus. At its most basic level salvation is experienced when one believes and receives. As Paul says in the letter to the Romans,

> If you declared with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.[22]

The legal ramifications of salvation are settled in this belief and declaration. But the Good News of the Gospel is not mere salvation from eternal damnation or a declaration of legal righteousness. Saving faith begins an eternal journey of living with God, knowing God and being known by Him, and reflecting His goodness to a lost and dying world.

New Identity in Christ

Because of Jesus' saving/healing love, all who believe are initiated into a new reality. To be in Christ means we have been redeemed from the dominion of darkness and brought into the Kingdom of the heavens. It is the truth described in Colossians 1.13-14, "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."[23]

[21] Hebrews 12.2.
[22] Romans 10.9-10.
[23] Colossians 1.13-14.

By repentance and faith we move into a new identity – the old is gone, and the new has come.[24] We are now firmly and eternally established in Christ. Ephesians 1.3-14 gives a definition to what we have received in Christ. The following has been personalized:

> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed me in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing **in Christ**.
>
> For He chose me **in Christ** before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight.
>
> In love He predestined me for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will— to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given me **in Christ**, the One He loves.
>
> **In Christ** I have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on me.
>
> With all wisdom and understanding, He made known to me the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed **in Christ**, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.
>
> **In Christ** I am chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope **in Christ**, might be for the praise of His glory.
>
> And I also was included **in Christ** when I heard the message of truth, the gospel of my salvation. When I believed, I was marked **in Christ** with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing my inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of His glory.[25]

In Christ we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing—redeemed, forgiven, adopted, declared holy and blameless in God's sight, and sealed with the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit! And as Dane Ortlund reminds us, "If you are in Christ, your sins cause that stockpile (of mercy) to grow all the more. Where sins abound, his grace superabounds. It is in your pockets of deepest shame and regret that his heart dwells and won't leave."[26]

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[24] See 2 Corinthians 5.17.
[25] See Ephesians 1.3-14.
[26] Dane Ortlund, *Deeper: Real Change for Real Sinners* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 34.

Every believer is now perfect in Christ. Not "one day." Not "someday." Not when we begin to pray and have regular quiet times, but now. Father Greg Boyle tells the homies at Homeboy Industries, "You are exactly what God had in mind when He created you."[27] He teaches the homeboys to live as if this truth were true until it becomes their truth.

> At Homeboy Industries, we seek to tell each person this truth: they are exactly what God had in mind when God made them—and then we watch, from this privileged place, as people inhabit this truth. Nothing is the same again. No bullet can pierce this, no prison walls can keep this out. And death can't touch it—it is just that huge.[28]

It is also true that every perfected believer is growing in holiness which is why the very next line in "Father G's" Tattoos on the Heart goes on to say,

> But much stands in the way of this liberating truth. You need to dismantle shame and disgrace, coaxing out the truth in people who've grown comfortable believing its opposite.[29]

There is a partnership with the Triune God in growing toward holiness. But this partnership, as "Father G" explains it, begins with the transformation of belief, first about God, and then self; and then the Christian life is transformed

The Christian life is not static. The call to holiness includes obedience, service, and care of others. Ultimately the call to holiness is the call to keep the first and second greatest commandment, to love God and love others.[30] Unfortunately, this is not the reality of most Christians.

A recent survey by the Barna Group identified a ten-step process of transformation in the lives of believers, leading to maturity in Christ.[31] The results indicate that the majority of

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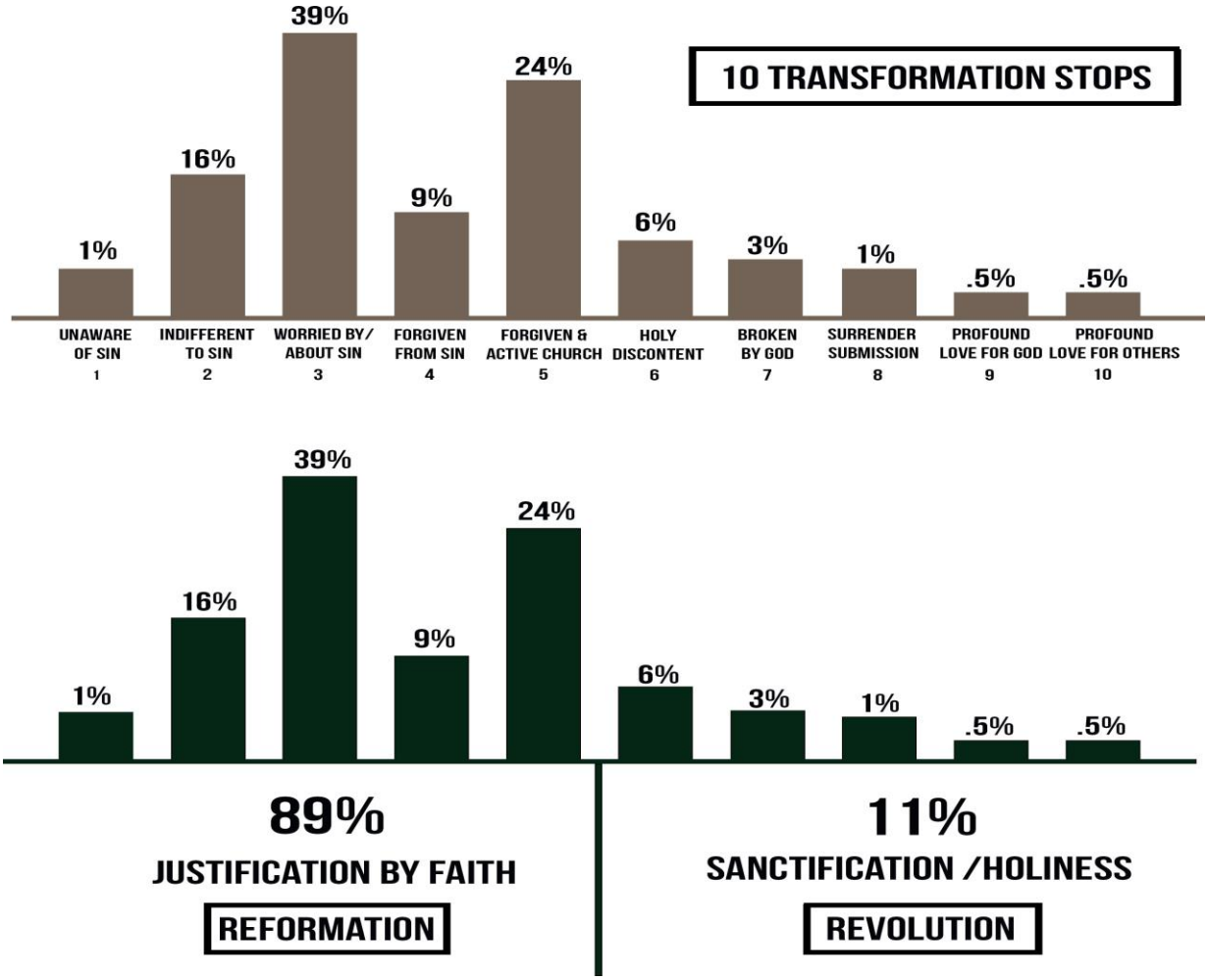
[27] Greg Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York, NY: Free Press, A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2011), 248.
[28] Boyle, *Tattoos*, 248.
[29] Boyle, *Tattoos*, 248.
[30] See Matthew 22.34-40.
[31] Barna, George. *Maximum Faith: Live Like Jesus. (*Ventura, CA: Metaformation and Stratengenius Group, 2011).

Christians have been stunted in their ability to live into the call of God, falling far short of fulfilling Christ's commands. 1% of Christians have come to a place of full obedience and devotion, with only 11% progressing to what might be characterized as greater stages of sanctification. Note the two graphics below.

Figure Two: 10 Transformational Stops



Go and Sin No More

Jesus offers the world such an incredible invitation. An invitation to love, an invitation to live freely, without hiding, without fear, to love and be loved just as we are, right where we are. Love is who He is. Love is His greatest command. Rich Villodas writes,

> Jesus's summary of Holy Scripture leads me to a conclusion that might surprise you: If the greatest commandment given by Jesus is rooted in love, the greatest sin—and perhaps all sin—must in some way be the rejection of this command…If love is the greatest good, sin must be the antithesis of it. Sin is not just a violation of a law; it's the disruption of love.[32]

Jesus invites us into His love and invites us into a life where sin does not rule and reign. Deeper still, He invites us to unlearn false beliefs and corresponding actions that lead to sin, and to learn to live freely and lightly, to live and love from a place of rest. His desire is so deep for the broken that He calls us forth from a place of sin. He says, "*Go and sin no more*."[33] John's Gospel records one such encounter.

> At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.
>
> But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.
>
> At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"
>
> "No one, sir," she said.

[32] Rich Villodas, *Good and Beautiful and Kind: Becoming Whole in a Fractured World* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2022), 4-5.
[33] See John 8.11.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."[34]

The woman caught in adultery was guilty. So, when dragged in front of all those who had gathered to hear Jesus, one can only imagine the unbearable shame she believes, and the feelings that accompany such a state.

But these men trying to catch Jesus in a religious trap did the best thing they could do for this woman. They brought her to Jesus. And from His lips she hears two of the most powerful statements anyone who struggles with shame from unwanted sexual behavior can ever hear. Jesus says to her, "neither do I condemn you" and "Go and leave your life of sin."

Jesus is giving this woman a new identity. In fact, when Paul writes, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,"[35] he may have had this very encounter in mind. When Jesus chooses not to condemn this woman, he is releasing her from judgment and setting her free. But, the second statement Jesus makes is just as crucial, for it complements and validates the first. Jesus says, "Go, and leave your life of sin."

John Ortberg paints a beautiful picture of this scene.

> Then Jesus says the words that cut her to the heart and bring her back to the heart and bring her back to life. They fill her with pain because they reveal to her that he knows all about her past. They fill her with hope because they tell her that Someone believes in her. These words will remain with her until she is old and wrinkled and gray, surrounded by a husband and children and grandchildren who love her. Jesus says, "Go, and sin no more."[36]

Jesus knows this will not be easy. He knows her life, her story. He knows this adulterous act did not "just happen." Her actions have been informed by her beliefs, and her beliefs have most likely been informed by her open wounds. Jesus knows her wounds, and His compassionate

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[34] John 8.2-11.

[35] Romans 8.1.

[36] John Ortberg, *Everyone is Normal Until You Get to Know Them* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 102.

words of forgiving grace have put a healing salve on those wounds. And maybe those wounds are instantly healed, and this woman will never struggle with this temptation again, or maybe she'll struggle with this temptation for the rest of her life. "By His wounds we are healed,"[37] Scripture says. But learning to live in the healing Jesus has come to bring takes a lifetime. These two statements remain for every believer. "No condemnation." And, "Go, and sin no more."[38]

Jesus forgave her sin. His grace covers all her false beliefs, feelings, and behaviors. His acceptance is free, undeserved, and unmerited. It comes with an invitation to new life. Jesus is inviting her into a new way of living and a new way of loving. He is inviting her into a new identity.

In this new identity, Jesus has given this woman purpose and vitality. He has given her beauty and grace. He has given her light and life. And that lifegiving light also shines light onto the darkness in her life. Now it is not only brighter in the light, the darkness has now become darker still. Parker Palmer testifies to this truth.

> In the midst of a depression I once asked my spiritual director how I could be feeling such despair when not long before the depression hit I had been feeling so close to God? "Simple," she said. "The closer you get to the light, the closer you get to darkness." The deepest things in life come not singly but in paradoxical pairs, where the light and the dark intermingle.[39]

The woman caught in adultery is accepted and forgiven by Jesus and yet there is a darkness of the flesh that remains. The darkness intermingles with the light, the flesh still wages

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[37] Isaiah 53.5.

[38] Like Jesus, the Church continues to offer such a call, "Go and sin no more." In a day where the nature and notion of sin have been removed from public dialogue, the Church must still hold fast to the theological, relational, and personal ramifications of sin. In her book "Speaking of Sin," Barbara Brown Taylor noted that, "Abandoning the language of sin will not make sin go away. Human beings will continue to experience alienation, deformation, damnation, and death no matter what we call them. Abandoning the language will simply leave us speechless before them, and increase our denial of their presence in our lives. Barbara Brown Taylor. *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation.* (Lanham, MD:
Cowley, 2001), 4.

[39] Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 1999), 100.

war.[40] The darkness is largely manifested in unhealed wounds. Both light and dark – spirit and flesh interplay in our beliefs, feelings, and actions. And there are times when not only do the light and dark intermingle but they cannot be separated. At times one can be unsure of what force is leading or convicting or confessing. This is true for all people, not just those who are experiencing unwanted sexual behavior.

When we enter the kingdom of the heavens, Jesus becomes the Light that shines brighter than any darkness, real or perceived. As we grow in holiness, we learn to recognize his light, life, and love and to walk in it, just as the woman caught in adultery would learn to do. John the Beloved writes,

> This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.[41]

Learning to walk in His light one must understand the difference between sin and wounds. The woman caught in adultery was forgiven her sin, but her wounds remain. Wounds are not sin, wounds are a consequence of sin. Learning to live in the healing Jesus comes to bring means tending to the wounds that remain from sin.

One truth we talk about at Sanctuary is the necessity to face our wounds. This is where learning to live in our healing begins. We often cite Richard Rohr who writes,

> In faith, there is no possibility of an uninterrupted success story. The only way you're going to face your wild beasts and your shadows is by failure and rejection, by people not loving you, by having to learn how to love your wife and your children and those who hurt you— the enemies—those who make you aware of your own incapacity to love.[42]

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[40] See Romans 7.21-25.
[41] 1 John 1.5-7.
[42] Richard Rohr, *The Four Gospels* [CD] (Albuquerque, NM: Center for Action and Contemplation, 1987).

For many, learning to live and love in healing will require "unlearning" ways of living and loving in the past. This "unlearning" includes considering not just the way love is expressed to others, but the way love is received from others. Our woundedness is the primary roadblock keeping us from moving out of the cul-de-sac of brokenness to live in the openness and adventure of healing, to give love freely, and to fully embrace love that is returned.

Unfortunately, deeply wounded people who do not learn to live and love in healing can perpetuate the cycle of sin and shame, continually recreating a society of wounded people. A young man at Sanctuary recently summarized this cycle in one sentence. "My dad beat religion into me, and then he beat it out of me." For many who are sexually broken wounds can be traced back to three places on the roadmap of life: Our own sin; a father or mother wound; or a wound at the hands of another.[43]

Our own sin

Simply stated, we sin because we want to. We choose to sin. But Scripture is clear even in its earliest pages that sin can be overcome.[44] It also teaches that with every temptation God provides a way out.[45] James provides a clear explanation of the progression of sin.

> When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.[46]

Tim Keller adds further clarification to James' comments about evil desire as the root of sin.

> The word that the NIV translates "sinful desires" and the ESV renders "lusts" is *epithumia*. Literally, it means "over-desire," an all-controlling drive and longing. This is revealing. The main problem of our heart is not so much desires for bad things, but our over-desires for good things, our turning of created, good things into gods, objects of our

[43] Adapted from the material presented by John and Stacey Lynch, Bruce McNicol, and Bill and Grace Thrall in *The Cure and Parents.* (San Clemente, CA: Cross Section Ventures, 2016).
[44] See Genesis 4.7.
[45] See 1 Corinthians 10.13.
[46] James 1.13-15.

> worship and service. And the worst thing that can happen to us is that we are given what our hearts over-desire.[47]

We sin because we desire good things for the wrong reasons and in the wrong ways.[48] We want them when we want them and how we want them. Transformation, therefore is not about suppressing sin, but growing in our capacity to understand our desire for sin, and from where that desire derives. Then we can leave behind our childish ways and grow toward maturity, desiring good things in godly ways.[49]

Father wound/mother wound

John and Stasi Eldredge, and John Lynch all help men identify the sources of their wounds. As young boys, we are instilled with an instinctive need to have our identity and worthiness seen, shaped, and affirmed by our parents. When this longing remains unmet, a wound is inflicted and remains open, serving as a primal guide throughout our lives.[50]

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[47] Timothy J. Keller, *Romans 1-7 For You.* (Epson, Surrey, England: The Good Book Company, 2014), 24. I love the Tim Keller quote, the idea over-desire. Ruth Haley Barton sheds light on our true desire, a desire that is aligned with the will of God, the way of God. She writes, "Your desire for more of God than you have right now, your longing for love, your need for deeper levels of spiritual transformation than you have experienced so far is the truest thing about you. You might think that your woundedness or your sinfulness is the truest thing about you or that your giftedness or your personality type or your job title or your identity as husband or wife, mother or father, somehow defines you. But in reality, it is your desire for God and your capacity to reach for more of God than you have right now that is the deepest essence of who you are." Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation (*Colorado Springs, CO: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 162.

[48] Curt Thompson points out a truth important to the understanding of our desires. "Our behavior is far more powerfully driven by the habits we form in our embodied movements than by what we "think." Before we are thinking creatures, we are desiring and then habit-forming creatures." Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Desire: Discovering the Neuroscience of Longing, Beauty and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 11.

[49] See 1 Corinthians 13.11.

[50] Eldredge points to particular moments in a child's life when they ask the question, "Do I have what it takes?" It is in these moments where children, primarily boys, are asking about their inherent value and worth, and they are asking the question specifically to their father. Eldredge says, "Miss that moment and you'll miss a boy's heart forever. It's not a question — it's the question, the one every boy and man is longing to ask. Do I have what it takes? Am I powerful? Until a man knows he's a man he will forever be trying to prove he is one, while at the same time shrinking from anything that might reveal he is not. Most men live their lives haunted by the question, or crippled by the answer they've been given." John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 64.

A "father wound" is a lack of blessing we expected or anticipated from a father or father-type figure.[51] "Someone important to you consistently choosing not to love you.'"[52] This "someone important" could be a pastor, a teacher, a coach, a small group leader or another family member. While the deepest pain comes from a parent choosing not to love, deep wounds can be inflicted and scars left by any important person choosing not to love. This can even happen when the person does not realize the kind of position the child has placed him in. The effect of this choice not to love can be excruciating.

Similarly, Stasi Eldredge encourages men to consider the "mother wound." She says boys receive their sense of identity from their father or father figure while their sense of worthiness is instilled by their mothers.[53] In her book *Becoming Myself*, Eldredge writes:

> Mothers bestow our self-worth, and they have the ability to withhold it. Intentionally, but more often unintentionally. A mother cannot pass on what she does not possess...Mothers have the ability to withhold acceptance, value, love. Our mothers failed us when, without meaning to, they passed on to us low self-esteem. Or based our self-worth on anything other than the fact that we exist.[54]

King David seemingly knows the heart cry of a father wound.[55] He writes these words of pain and praise, "Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me."[56]

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[51] In my experience the father wound has the most devastating effects on men. The unresolved issues that accompany an unhealed father wound not only affect the man but their family, including children and grandchildren. It becomes a generational wound.

[52] John and Stacey Lynch, Bruce McNicol, and Bill and Grace Thrall in *The Cure and Parents.* (San Clemente, CA: Cross Section Ventures, 2016), 7.

[53]Stasi Eldredge, *Becoming Myself: Embracing God's Dream of You* (Colorado Springs, Co: David C. Cook, 2013).

[54] Eldredge, *Becoming Myself*, 76.

[55] See 1 Samuel 16.1-13. Of this text, Chuck Swindoll writes, "It's remarkable, isn't it, how Jesse reveals two very common mistakes parents make. Number one, he didn't have an equal appreciation for all of his children. And number two, he failed to cultivate a mutual self-respect among them. Jesse saw his youngest as nothing more than the one who tended the sheep." Charles Swindoll, *Great Lives: David* (Thomas Nelson, 1997), 20.

[56] Psalm 27.10. See 1 Samuel 16.1-13.

A mother wound or father wound when not healed will stunt a man's ability to give and receive love. When left unhealed, that man will not only live in a perpetual state of immaturity; he will also stunt the maturity of his children.

Other wound

David, a man after God's own heart lived in a stunted level of maturity, and from that place, he inflicted the greatest kind of damage. 2 Samuel 11, a well-known passage, is often read through the lens of David and his failures as King, husband, father, and friend. The text reads quite differently from Bathsheba's perspective. We do not know Bathsheba's posture after being summoned to the palace. We only know of David's crushing violence and brutality following this encounter. But Bathsheba's pain and suffering must have been immense—her purity violated, her husband murdered, her reputation scarred and her child lost.

While the father and mother wounds are caused by something being withheld, the "other wound" is caused by something being taken, innocence being stolen, vulnerability being abused, a soul being shattered. Sounds like Bathsheba.

For a man suffering from the "other wound" learning to live in the healing Jesus came to bring does not happen in a weekend workshop. For some, the excruciating trauma of an "other wound" is something we continue to learn or unlearn every day for the rest of our lives.

To close this section on woundedness Jay Stringer gets the last word. What they reveal is that the way wounds affect the sexually broken may not be obvious to on the surface. They may not even be understood by the person themselves.

> Unwanted sexual behavior is not primarily an attempt to remedy or self-soothe the pain of a wounded child. It is attempting to reenact the formative stories of trauma, abuse, and shame that convinced us we were unwanted to begin with. In other words, we are not addicted primarily to sex or even a disordered intimacy; instead, we are bonded to feelings of shame and judgment.

> In this way, unwanted sexual behavior is not seeking medication but rather a familiar poison to deaden our imagination that something could change for the better.[57]

Being Made Holy

The Spirit of God leads each believer in the process of transformation. While one area of life may seem to be strong and another weak, the Spirit is constantly at work to move His people toward wholeness and holiness. He uses both the seen and the unseen to draw us toward Him in love. Peter and Paul both encourage, even command holiness for every follower of Jesus:

> But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.[58]

> And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.[59]

These two passages are interdependent. God wants each believer to grow in every area of life. Growth is the essence of being conformed to the image and character of His Son. Through God's constant presence in our lives, He uses all things, both seen and unseen, to draw us closer to Him. The Spirit guides, directs, comforts, and convicts, and He is always helping us to rest and remember.

Growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ (transformation) is never linear. While a wealth of strategies help promote spiritual growth, the spiritual journey cannot be bound by a prescription, a strategy, or "five snappy steps toward spiritual perfection." Being conformed to the character of Christ— which is the spiritual journey—is full of starts and stops. It is mysterious and miraculous. It is full of beauty and, at times, great pain.

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[57] Jay Stringer, *Unwanted: How Sexual Brokenness Reveals Our Way to Healing* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress 2018), 11.
[58] 2 Peter 3.18.
[59] Romans 8:28–29.

While there is no simple strategy, and people grow differently, many Christian leaders have argued that there are constant dynamics in the spiritual journey. Traditionally, a path or road has been used to portray the journey toward transformation. At Sanctuary we use the phrase "taking a next step" in our relationship with Christ. But a better metaphor for spiritual growth might be a stream. One enters into a stream of intimacy with God that leads to maturity. The Spirit of God is at work, and like the water in the stream, His current moves us along toward deeper places in life and love.

M. Robert Mullholland and Ruth Haley Barton put a fresh understanding on the classic four-stage pilgrimage of growing in Christ.[60] Historically it is through these four traditional dynamics of growth—Awakening, Purgation, Illumination, and Union—that the believer experiences deeper places of holiness. Before diving into the stream with Mullholland and Barton, however, let us remember that there is no step-by-step process to produce super-spiritual change. Real change is dependent upon motives, not just methods or models. Partnership with the Holy Spirit is what brings change. Change depends on trusting Him, even embracing mystery as He guides and directs the shaping of hearts.

Awakening: the initial encounter with God and with our true self

This first dynamic can occur either gradually or radically. Many believers become more and more aware over time that God is love and that His love has always been present. Others are confronted profoundly by the love of God, which has a dramatic effect on the awareness of self and of God. Awakening occurs in many ways. For many, awakening occurs through a

[60] The origins of this process are not known. Much attention has been given to the work of Teresa of Avila most prominently in her writings, "The Interior Castle" first published in 1577, which began to give further clarity at this process. For more understanding see Teresa of Avila. *The Interior Castle.* New York, NY: Cosimo, 2007.

meaningful encounter with truth, a profound experience of serving, a great personal failure (or loss), and through suffering. It is often suffering, failure or loss that causes awakening to occur, because it brings one to the point of recognizing that money, power, relationships, or control is not enough. In suffering, there is an awareness that one cannot continue with life as it is.

According to Mullholland, two primal emotions are often associated with awakening: *comfort* and *threat*:

> It is comfort because there is a sense of awakening to deeper realities of who we are and who God is. But at the same time there is threat: in that awakening we recognize that we are not what we ought to be and that God is something far more than we thought. And so there is an ambivalence in genuine awakening. Something in us hungers for this, yet something in us also resists.
>
> The more we embrace this new awakening, the more freedom we experience. With that freedom comes the resistance to our false self's inclination to cling to old ways of living and loving. The false self wants to hold on to what is seen and known, what seems to work. The authentic self is desperate for the abundant life Jesus came to bring.[61]

Purgation: the process of bringing our behavior, attitudes, and desires into increasing harmonywith our growing perception of what Christlike life is all about

In this dynamic, one begins to see himself more truly and fully in the light of Christ's presence. As sin becomes more visible and visceral, there is a growing ability to recognize "gross sins" that are inconsistent with wholeness in Christ, and a desire to purge those things that become more and more obvious as sin or even as unneeded in a newly awakened relationship with Christ.

In purgation, the stream of God's Spirit moves from renouncing "big" sins to exploring the unconscious sins of the false self, and the places that still cry out when wounded. In purgation there is a sense of God calling out parts of the believers' character that are unlike Him,

[61] M. Robert Mullholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Roadmap for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), 96.

including things that might seem "acceptable" in a church or in Christian culture. As growth continues the desire grows to expose the hidden dimensions of the heart that hold secret agendas of self-protection and self-satisfaction. In purgation, there is a willingness to examine inconsistencies in the way life and love are stewarded. Here, the Spirit has the freedom to challenge deep-seated structures, attitudes, and wounds that affect our behavior patterns, ultimately challenging the trust patterns inherent in each believer.

Barton says that through purgation:

> We see places where we are living in sin. We recognize places in our lives where we are relying on our false-self patterns. Here, God is stripping away those things that are not necessary or things that don't belong in our relationship with God or prevent us from a deeper union with God.[62]

Mulholland describes the tension of purgation this way:

> The stage of purgation is characterized by the struggle of two selves: the self that is not yet all that it has been created to be in God's will for our wholeness, and the wholeness of self that God holds out before us. The old, anxious, egocentric self is called to increasing mortification in order that the new, peace-filled, God-centered self may come more and more into being.[63]

To summarize, one man in our church recently said, "In purgation, the struggle is real but totally worth it. Purgation is the transition between Romans 7 and Romans 8."

Illumination: the experience of total consecration to God in love

Illumination is characterized by radical (and sometimes not-so-radical) shifts in the deep dynamics of our being, producing a profound transformation of our relationship with God. Maturing faith in the will and ways of God produce greater ability to live in God's peace and release root causes of anxiety, worry, and fear.

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[62] Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 102.
[63] Mullholland, *Journey*, 125.

Mulholland says succinctly:

> Illumination is the experience of total consecration to God in love. Rather than my being in charge of my relationship with God, God is given absolute control of the relationship.[64]

A great shift occurs in illumination. Mulholland says the basic shift is:

> ...from seeing God as "out there" to an experience of God present deep within our being. This goes hand in hand with the deep level of absolute trust to which the purgative stage brings us.[65]

Thomas Merton puts it like this:

> We awaken not only to a realization of the immensity and majesty of God "out there" as King and Ruler of the universe (which He is) but also a more intimate and more wonderful perception of Him as directly and personally present in our own being...If we are involved only in our surface existence, in externals, and in the trivial concerns of our ego, we are untrue to Him and to ourselves. To reach a true awareness of Him as well as ourselves, we have to renounce our selfish and limited self and enter into a whole new kind of existence, discovering an inner center of motivation and love which makes us see ourselves and everything else in an entirely new light.[66]

To be sure, illumination is not a season of uninterrupted peace and patience. It is not a season of arrival or having it all together. Illumination is a new season of enabling new structures for being and doing. As striving, working, hustling for God's love, or working "for Him," are released, His gifts emerge, and a deeper trust and intimacy with God and with others continues to flourish. Old beliefs and behaviors are released and replaced by the emergence of foundational Scriptural truths. God is given full access and control. As His love further reshapes beliefs and behaviors, increasing awareness of the plight and needs of others comes into view, often resulting in greater social concern to the lost and to those in need.

Union: Complete harmony between the movement of the human mind and will and the loving designs of God— an absolute certainty of God's presence in the soul.

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[64] Mullholland, *Journey*, 126.
[65] Mullholland, *Journey*, 127.
[66] Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Master: The Essential Writings*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 372.

Union incorporates the moments of being caught up in God's character. Here, souls are unified with Christ, and experiences of full joy, adoration, and praise are integrated into ordinary, everyday life with Christ. Here, there is a more profound recognition of the gift of grace, receiving it more fully and extending it more genuinely.

Union is more about receiving His love and resting in His love. Union is a space of full acceptance of ourselves in God's love, shedding the belief that we somehow cause Him to love us. Union brings the believer to a place where there is no longer a constant need for human approval or reinforcement.

Mulholland notes two helpful images for understanding the dynamic of union. The first, illustrated so beautifully by Hildegard of Bingen, is being a feather on the breath of God.[67] In the second, union is described by St. Catherine of Genoa this way:

> God busies the soul with Himself, in no matter how slight a way, and the soul, wrapped up in God, cannot but be oblivious to all else.[68]

I will close this section with a prayer from M. Robert Mullholland.

> O God of wholeness, when I consider the lack of balance and wholeness in my life, the one-sided spiritualities with which I attempt to appease you, to appear good in the eyes of others and to please myself, I come face to face with my need for a holistic spiritual life. Help me, I pray, to hunger and thirst for the wholeness you have for me in Christ. Help me to be willing to surrender to you whatever stands in the way of such wholeness.[69]

[67] Mullholland, *Journey* 133.
[68] Mullholland, *Journey*, 133.
[69] Mullholland, *Journey*, 85.

Conclusion

We are at once healed, whole and holy, and learning how to live in our healing, wholeness, and holiness. This is a life-long process. There will always be places of learning and unlearning in the transformation process. In Christ, sins are forgiven. Healing has come. One day we will experience ultimate healing, and complete wholeness, and enter into a perfect state of holiness. We too will join the celestial chorus declaring the goodness, majesty, beauty, and holiness of God.

> Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:
>
> "'Holy, holy, holy
> is the Lord God Almighty,
> who was, and is, and is to come."
>
> Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:
>
> > "You are worthy, our Lord and God,
> > to receive glory and honor and power,
> > for you created all things,
> > and by your will they were created
> > and have their being."[70]

[70] Revelation 4.8-11.

CHAPTER FOUR

SEXUALLY REDEEMED: LEARNING TO REST IN THE FINISHED WORK OF THE CROSS

It is finished.
John 19:30

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there.[1]
Rumi

Timeline

Research and Writing of Project: June 2021 – present

Sex and Sexuality Statement Researched, Written and Published: June 2021 – December 2021

Early Content Writing: November – December 2021

Small Group Presentation: January 7 – February 4, 2022

Churchwide Survey of Men: July 30 – July 10, 2022

Equipping Small Group Leaders: July 11 – August 5, 2022

Season of Invitation: July 26 – August 17, 2022

Study: August 17 – September 21, 2022

Debrief & Vision Casting with Small Group Leaders: September 21 – October 2, 2022

Disciples Making Disciples[2] Launch: October 7, 2022

[1] Rumi, *The Essential Rumi* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1995) 36.
[2] Craig Bowler, *Disciples Making Disciples* (Acworth, GA: Sanctuary, 2022).

Introduction

This thesis-project was birthed out of a two-week Pastoral Counseling and Caregiving DMin. course at Gordon-Conwell Seminary in June of 2021. The course, and the ongoing dialogue among students, as well as the subsequent reading, had a profound impact on me personally, and from the overflow of learning, an impact on our church.

Early conversations on this topic began with our Vision Team (staff) and then we shared with our Elders (lay leaders). Together we entered a prolonged season of prayer and discernment to better clarify God's will and His way for our church. The earliest forms of discernment produced our now-published Sex and Sexuality Statement.[3] From there we began to discern how best to "live into" God's design of our sexuality, including in places of sexual brokenness. We soon landed on the core issue of beliefs, including what we believe about our sexual brokenness and redemption. Ultimately, the focus became belief and identity in Christ couched in the context of our sexuality. This thesis-project is the cumulative sum of our work.

The purpose of this project is multifaceted, but it is centered on belief, especially our identity in Christ. Therefore, the first three chapters are crucial, since they identify the problem of sexual brokenness and provide a theological response to the problem, including research-rich data all grounded in Scripture. These three chapters give shape and form to the curriculum of the fourth chapter, Sexually Redeemed: Learning to Rest in the Finished Work of the Cross," designed to lead men and women in our church, which inform both the content and the context for our study. It then outlines the five-week curriculum including large-group teaching, small-group discussion, and personal engagement.

[3] See Appendix I.

Gleanings from Survey

A churchwide survey[4] was designed to gain a better understanding of the views of men in matters of community, intimacy, and sexual health. It was sent to men, 18 years old and older who had registered for at least one Men's Ministry gathering at Sanctuary since January 2021. Included were church staff, elders, and Men's Ministry team leaders. Of the 92 invitations to participate in the survey 71 completed responses were received. Responses ranged from men aged 20 – 82 years old.

The survey was comprised of 24 questions divided into four primary areas of emphasis. The first area gathered basic demographic data. The second focused on community, specifically community participation and whether the respondent believed community was a place of transformation. The third focused on intimacy. Here, the desire was to understand what men believed about intimacy, and where they were currently experiencing intimacy. The final questions examined sexual health, including the respondent's belief about how God views their sexual story.

The survey was quite revealing. While affirming some of what we already believed about the men in our church, it also uncovered beliefs of which we were unaware. The following comments highlight some of the most intriguing results.

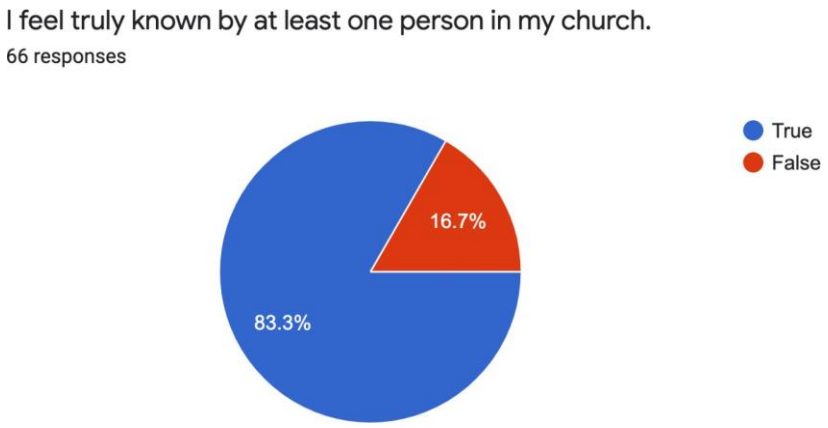
Community:

The survey revealed that 49.3% of these men participated in community every week. Regarding sharing their sexual story with other men, 62.7% indicated someone in their community knows the current chapter of their sexual story. The most affirming indicator from

[4] See Appendix II for the full survey.

this portion of the survey was that 83.3% of men feel truly known by at least one person in the church. Praise God!

Figure Three: I Feel Known



Intimacy:

The survey invited men to share places in their lives where they experienced intimacy. Questions included intimacy with a spouse, best friend, other men in the church, and intimacy with God. The continuum moved from 1 – intimate to 5 – no intimacy. 71.6% of men indicated they experienced deep intimacy with God (responses 1 and 2 in Figure 4 below). This too is to be celebrated. The result that brings pause, however, is their perception of intimacy in friendships. More than half of the men surveyed indicated they are not experiencing deeper levels of intimacy with friends (responses 3-5 in Figure 4 below).

Figure Four: Intimacy with God

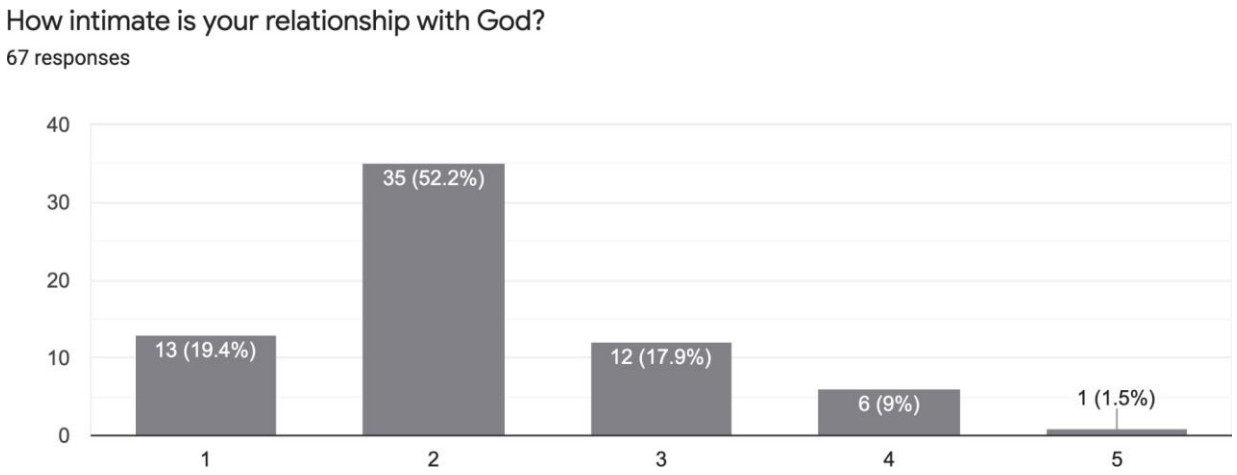
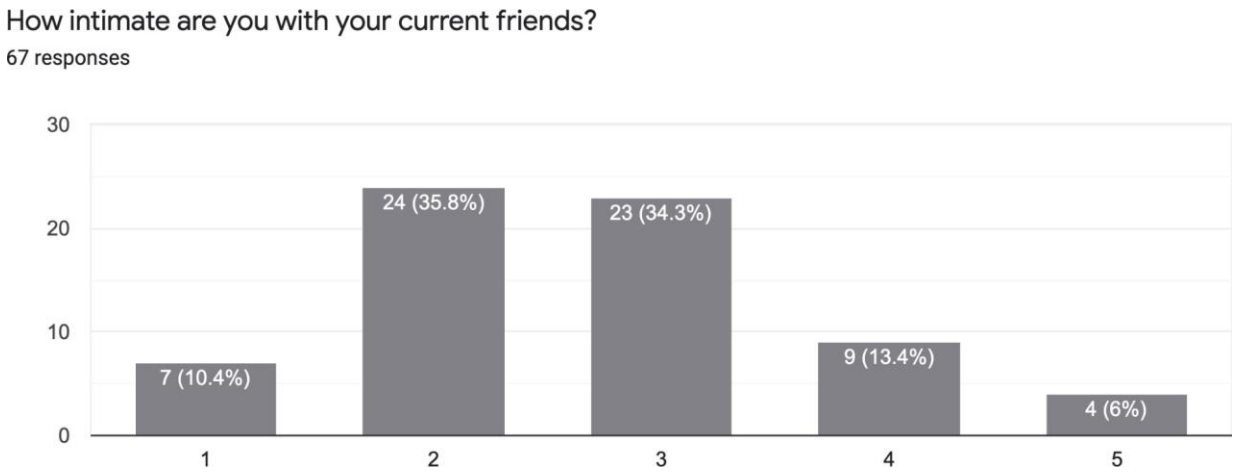


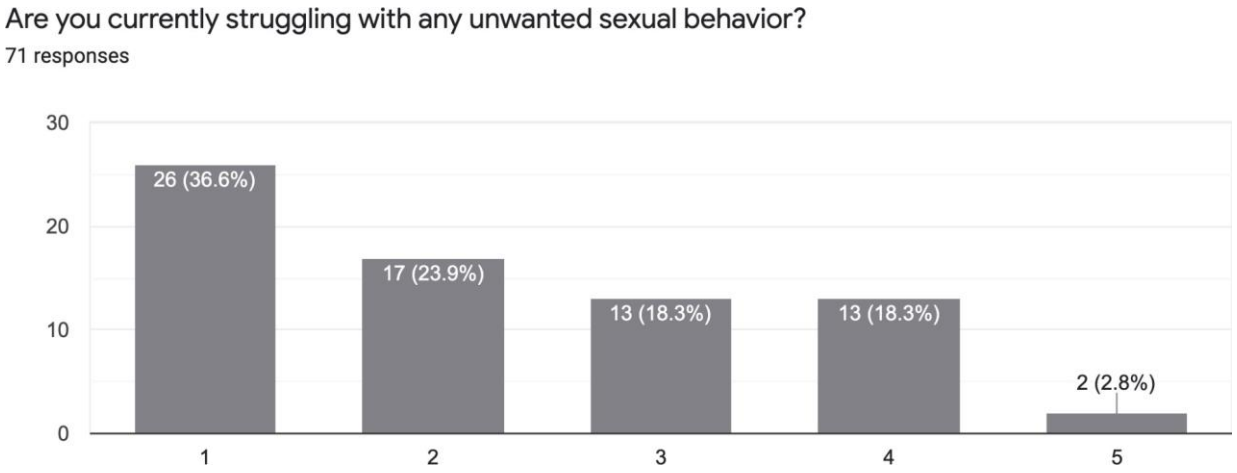
Figure Five: Intimacy with Friends



Sexual Health:

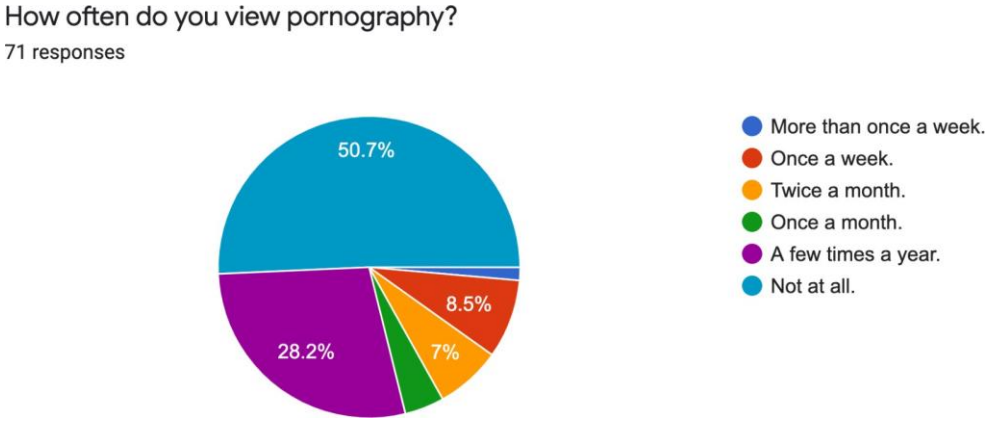
The overall response to sexual health was encouraging. More than ¾ of the men surveyed indicated a self-diagnosis of little to no struggle with unwanted sexual behavior whereas 21.8% of men indicated a regular to a constant struggle with unwanted sexual behavior.

Figure Six: Struggle with Unwanted Sexual Behavior



When asked about pornography use, 50% of men indicated they do not engage with pornography at all. Conversely, just under 50% of men do view pornography, and 9.9% of those responders view pornography "once a week" or "more than once a week."

Figure Seven: Viewing Pornography

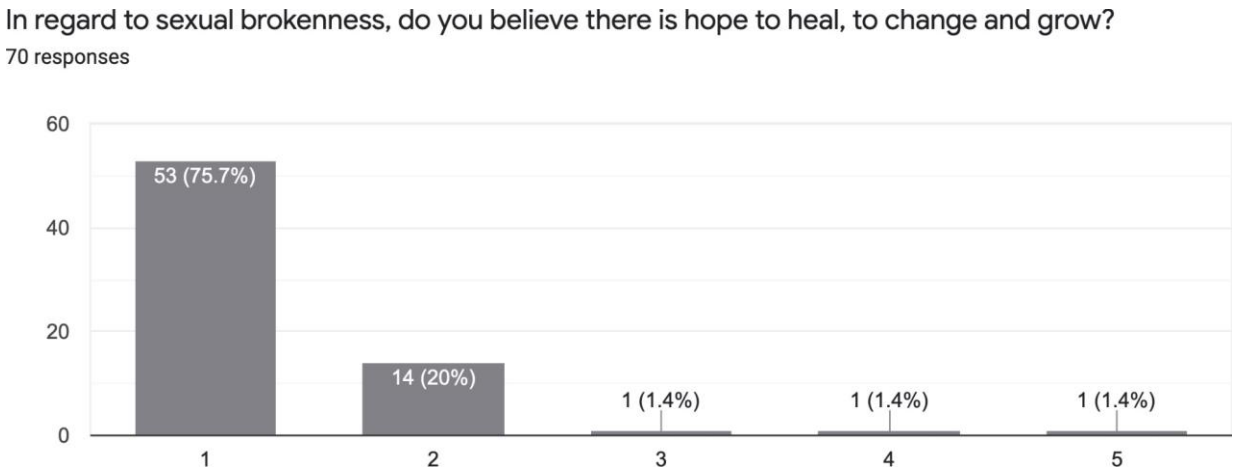


Beliefs:

Three sets of answers proved particularly to the leaders at Sanctuary. All three statistics come from questions about beliefs. The first question centered around beliefs about sexual

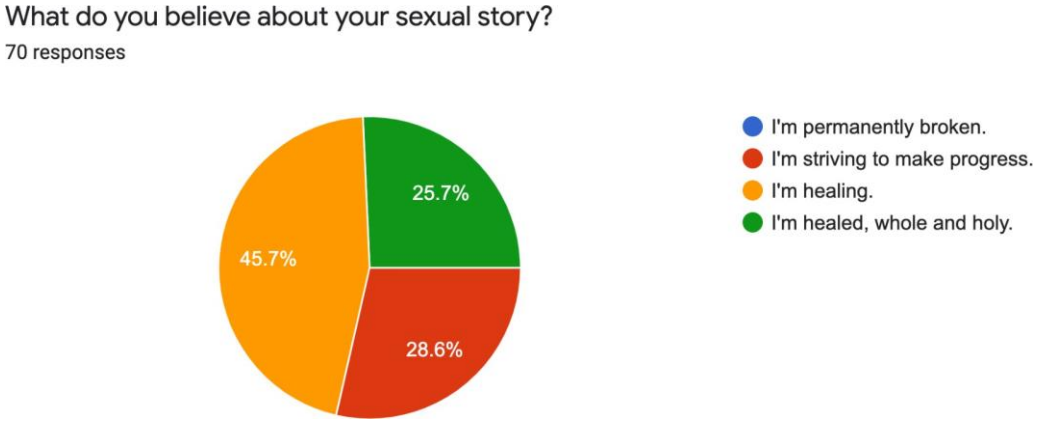
brokenness. Combing the first and second responses on the continuum from “full belief” to “unbelief”, we found a staggering 95.7% of men say they “believe” there is “hope to heal, change and grow.”

Figure Eight: Belief to Change and Grow



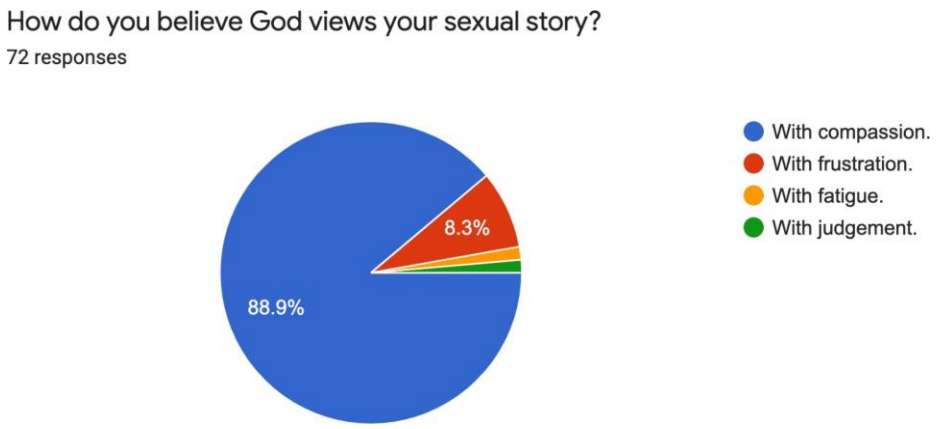
The second affirming statistic came from the responses to the question, “What do you believe about your sexual story?” Maturing responses were given by all respondents, and there were no respondents who believed they were “permanently broken.”

Figure Nine: Belief about Sexual Story



The most affirming statistic of the whole survey was the way responders believed God viewed their sexual story. When asked, “How does God view your sexual story,” 88.7% said God views their story, “With compassion.”

Figure Ten: God’s Belief about Sexual Story



Survey Review

The completed results of the survey were examined by our Vision Team. We gave God praise for His faithfulness to His Church and His prevailing love in the lives of each man in our ministry. We particularly celebrated the responses around the belief of healing and change, and the belief that God views the sexual story with compassion. However, the fact that many men are not deeply connected relationally, gave us pause. In response, we determined to provide more connection points in the life of our church and also create a more intentional time of connection within this study itself.

As our Vision Team studied the survey, questions began to emerge about how this same survey, and possibly this type of study, would be received by women in our Faith Family. Our

Pastor with Adults, Heather Canup, asked for consideration to be given for the upcoming study to be offered to both men and women. While this idea had been discussed in the past, the consensus was for this study to be intentionally done with men. But after much prayer and conversation, our Vision Team discerned it was God's best to offer the study to a limited number of participants (15) that would include both men and women. Heather Canup would join me as a co-facilitator, and together we would equip small group leaders to partner in leading the study. This dramatic shift led to a re-write of portions of the content to connect with both men and women, and a revision of how the study would be presented and received. Because the survey revealed such a deep desire for connection we decided to reimagine small groups and the sharing of stories.

Overview of Study

This section provides an overview of the study developed for our church, "Sexually Redeemed: Learning to rest in the finished work of the cross." It includes the overall purpose of the study, the primary focus areas of content, and the main themes of each week. The study in its entirety is contained in Appendix III, which was published by the church as a workbook.[5]

Purpose:

The study, "Sexually Redeemed" focuses on what Christian men and women believe about their identity in Christ, and uses the experience of shame and unwanted sexual behavior to

[5] Craig Bowler, *"Sexually Redeemed: Learning to rest in the finished work of the cross."* (Kennesaw, GA: Sanctuary), 2022.

examine those beliefs and help each participant affirm their true identity in Christ. As it says in the introduction to the study.[6]

> This study is about God. This is study is about you. This study is about God's indescribable love for you, a love so deep, so profound, so all-encompassing that He made a way for you to be able to say, "I am His beloved with whom He is well pleased." And it's a study we believe will cause you to fall more in love with Him.

Understanding what heaven believes about sin and grace ultimately shapes our beliefs about ourselves and the world around us. So, each section of the study is designed to help people examine the implications of Scripture and build their lives around the truth of God's Word.

Primary Focus Areas:

The content of the study is broken up into six sections, with each section building upon truths gleaned from Scripture. And each section, comprised of six parts, is designed to be studied together in a session.

Part One of each session begins with a large group teaching on the week's main theme and then pauses for personal reflection on what is being taught. Part Two continues with more large group teaching, digging further into the primary Scriptural truth. Small group discussion follows with questions that explore the implications of Scripture, and leads to a conversation about "living into" Scripture as our primary invitation and call.

Part Three is an Exercise. In this section, an idea or illustration is presented to move men and women deeper into how this truth impacts their personal world, how the idea presented has shaped them, or where a false belief may have taken root. The Exercise is done individually and shared with the small group for communal growth.

[6] Bowler, *Redeemed*, 4.

Part Four gives the participant time to consider their own sexual story. Each week a few prompts are offered to help the participants name some aspect of their sexual experience and the beliefs it has engendered. The goal is to help the participant create a basic outline by the end of the study, which, if the participants chooses, will enable him/her to share their story with the rest of the small group

Part Five provides time as a small group to consider areas of further discussion, and time to pray, including confession and blessing. Part Six closes each lesson with a prayer from one of the participants and a Scripture passage that affirms the belief being taught in each lesson.

Main Themes:

Most participants in this study will be introduced to the general ideas of the study when they are invited to attend – in a church service, or personally by a friend, lay leader, or staff member. Another clear introduction will be provided when a person registers for the study so that no one will be caught unaware of the subject matter.

The titles and main themes for each week are as follows:

Week One – It is Finished: John 19.30

Week One summarizes the finished work of the cross as noted in John's Gospel. This is the crux of the rest of the study. What each participant believes about the atonement will set a trajectory for not just the rest of this study, but for the rest of their lives. What happened on the cross and resurrection is not only the most important event in redemptive history but the most important reality in every believer's life. Additional Scripture will be examined in support of this main theme including, Genesis 2.4-25 and 3.6-7; 1 Corinthians 6.18 and Isaiah 43.1-7.

The study of the narrative in Genesis 2 and 3 introduces the topics of nakedness, shame, and the human sexual story, but also the hope of the Gospel. As the study guide insists.

> Brothers and sisters, God approaches us in our nakedness to bring us joy, not to express His disappointment in us. His heart is to exchange our ashes for beauty, our mourning for joy, and our despair for praise (see Isaiah 61:3). There is no shame so deep that the love of God cannot reach it. There is no story He cannot redeem. The paradox of the gospel is that our failures do not condemn us; they connect us.[7]

One unique feature in week one is the inclusion of The Final Word Project[8] curated by Brady Smith. Brady invited his friends, and in week one of this study, we invited men and women, to come to an understanding of God's Final Word about them. The project includes a series of photos followed by a few prompts to help each person come to God's Final Word, essentially describing what heaven believes about each person.

The Prompts:

- Do you believe in God?
- What do you think of God?
- What are some things God might think of you?
- What are the top three words God might use to describe you?
- What is one thing you think God most often says about you?

Figure Eleven: Final Word Project

Week Two – By His Wounds We Are Healed: Isaiah 53.5

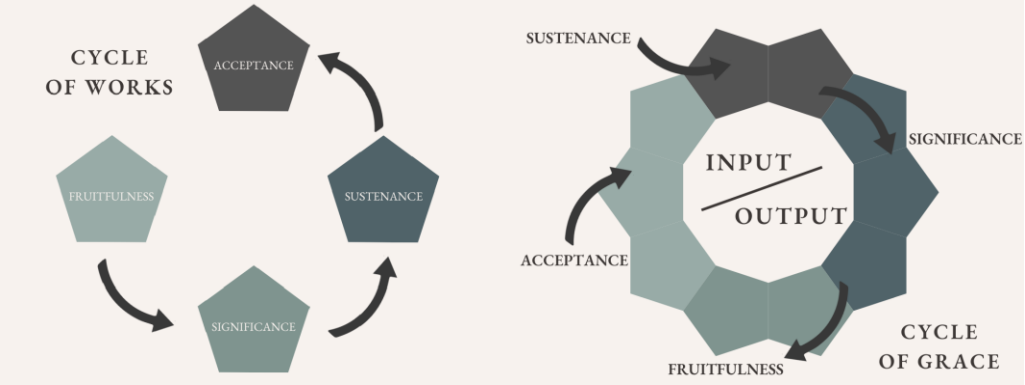
Week Two summarizes the healing nature of God's love which comes through His

[7] Bowler, *Redeemed*, 16.
[8] Brady Smith," The Final Word Project" [photography] Brady Smith publication, accessed July 5, 2022. https://lightroom.adobe.com/shares/c256e7f35ccc4fd0be781847787847a9.

suffering as proclaimed in Isaiah 53. Because of Jesus' suffering, healing is now livable reality for those who come to know God through Him. Additional Scripture will be examined in support of this main theme, including 1 Samuel 16.1-13; Psalm 27.10; 2 Samuel 11; Romans 12.1-3; John. 20.24-28. This section also encourages participants to look at the original cause of their woundedness.

One unique feature in the content this week is the teaching around three different "cycles." The first cycle examined is a shame cycle, which explains what commonly happens when shame is believed (see Figure 1 in chapter one, page 11). It gives a glimpse of a common cycle when shame is believed. The second is called a "Cycle of Works" and the third is a "Cycle of Grace," both cycles created and explained by Trevor Hudson.[9]

Figures 12 & 13 Cycle of Works; Cycle of Grace



A sample portion from this week's study is as follows:

> Unwanted sexual behavior is not primarily an attempt to remedy or self-soothe the pain of a wounded child. It is attempting to reenact the formative stories of trauma, abuse, and shame that convinced us we were unwanted to begin with. In other words, we are not addicted primarily to sex or even a disordered intimacy; instead, we are bonded to feelings of shame and judgment.

[9] Trevor Hudson, *The Cycle of Grace: Living in Sacred Balance.* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2012), 99, 102.

> In this way, unwanted sexual behavior is not seeking medication but rather a familiar poison to deaden our imagination that something could change for the better.[10]

Week Three – Where Have You Come From and Where Are You Going: Genesis 16.8.

Week Three focuses on God's presence amid sin and shame as revealed in Genesis 16.1-13. The chapter focuses on God meeting Hagar in the wilderness, and suggests that God meets us in our own wilderness as He did Adam, David, and Hagar. Attention will be given to where men and women go when they hide. Additional Scripture will be examined in support of this main theme, including Psalm 23, Psalm 32.1-7 and Matthew 11.28-30.

One unique feature in the content this week is the exercise, "The Soundtrack." In this exercise, participants are asked to name a one-sentence soundtrack that plays in their heads over and over again. For example,

- I'm always needed but never wanted. I am not enough.
- It's my fault.
- I'm too much
- I'll never get it right.
- I don't matter, anyway.
- If you only knew.
- You have no idea.
- My love won't change a thing.

Then using the following questions, they are to discuss that phrase with their small group:

1. What is the one-sentence phrase you hear over and over again?
2. Where does that phrase take you? What does it lead you to think about?
3. When did you first begin to hear that phrase? What is its source?
4. What is the one-sentence phrase you'd like to hear over and over again?

Here is a sample portion from this week's study:

> Hagar, whose name in Hebrew means "flight," has fled from the biblical heroes-to-be, Abram and Sarai, and run away to the desert. In Scripture, the desert or wilderness is often the geography of trauma and death. Hagar runs to the wilderness. And here is where

[10] Jay Stringer, *Unwanted: How Sexual Brokenness Reveals Our Way to Healing* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2018), 11.

> God meets her with the most staggering question. *"Where have you come from, and where are you going?"*
>
> In the wilderness, God reveals Himself to us in two ways: He is the God who hears, and He is the God who sees… In the wilderness, in the place where Hagar has run away to die—it's here that we learn about the character of God. He is the God who hears and the God who sees. Your wilderness, the place where you go to hide, the place where you look at pornography or the other places you run do not separate you from God. Your wilderness connects you with God.[11]

Week Four – There is No Fear in Love: 1 John 4.18

Week Four centers on the nature of fear, and Scripture's call to live free from fear in 1 John 4.7-21. Fear became part of the human experience in the fall, but after the coming of Christ, John reminds us there is no place for fear in love. Attention will be given to places where participants may be motivated by fear to self-protect, perform, or try and heal themselves. Additional Scripture will be examined in support of this main theme. Scripture studied will include Genesis 3.1-10, Romans 8.1, 31-39, Galatians 5.1 and John 17.20-26.

One unique feature in the content this week is space set aside to discuss the "Modesto Manifesto," more commonly known, as "The Billy Graham Rules." We will look specifically at the second rule as noted by Billy Graham in his autobiography:

> The second item on the list was the danger of sexual immorality. We all knew of evangelists who had fallen into immorality while separated from their families by travel. We pledged among ourselves to avoid any situation that would have even the appearance of compromise or suspicion. From that day on, I did not travel, meet, or eat alone with a woman other than my wife. We determined that the Apostle Paul's mandate to the young pastor Timothy would be ours as well: "Flee ... youthful lusts" (2 Timothy 2:22, KJV).[12]

A sample portion from this week's study is the following quote from Jay Stringer, and Galatians 5.1.

[11] Stringer, *Unwanted,* 60.
[12] Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (HarperCollins Worldwide and Zondervan, 2007), 128-129.

> Approaches to healing that are centered on what is wrong with us will never lead to the type of transformation we desire and deserve. The gospel teaches us that we are beloved before any sexual sin or addiction entered our lives, and we remain so, even at the height of our brokenness.[13]

> It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.[14]

Week Five – Comfort for Us; Comfort for Others

Week Five creates space for men to be reminded of both the trouble in this world and the peace that is given by the God of all comfort. The invitation for men to share their sexual stories and pray for each other is the most important part of this week's study. Additional Scripture will be examined in support of this main theme. Scripture to be studied will include John 16.33, Hebrews 4.14-16, and Matthew 16.18.

One unique feature in the content this week is viewing the film "Heart of Man"[15] based on the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The film includes a narrative from psychologist Dr. Dan Allendar, author William P. Young, and pastor John Lynch.

A sample portion from this week's study is the following quote from David Benner.

> Moving truths such as "God loves me" from our head to our heart is often difficult. It is possible, but only as we journey with others. The God who is Divine community is known only in human community. Deep knowing of perfect love, just like deep knowing of ourselves, demands that we be in relationships of spiritual friendship. No one should ever expect to make the journey alone.[16]

Conclusion

The study was conducted on five Wednesday nights in two-hour sessions at Sanctuary from August 17 – September 21, 2022. 18 people participated in the study in addition to two co-facilitators. The results of the study will be shared in the next chapter.

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[13] Stringer, *Unwanted,* 60.
[14] Galatians 5.1.
[15] Eric Esau. (Director). *The Heart of Man* [Film]. Sypher Studios, 2017.
[16] David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* (InterVarsity Press, 2015), 49.

CHAPTER FIVE

SEXUALLY REDEEMED STUDY- SOME REFLECTIONS

This, then, is how you should pray:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.
Matthew 6.9-13

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."
"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.
"Not because you are?"
"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."[1]
C.S. Lewis

Introduction

A young artist in our church gave my wife and me a painting that now sits in the window next to our kitchen table. It says, "In this home as it is in heaven." N.T. Wright notes, "Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven."[2]

[1] C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, reprint, 1994), 141.
[2] N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church.* New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008), 293.

"On earth as in heaven."[3] That is the heartbeat of this thesis-project. In this church as in heaven. In this marriage as in heaven. In this family as in heaven. In this heart as in heaven. Jesus prayed for the Father's will to be done on earth as in heaven.

Our prayer is for men and women to know the Father's will and to learn to live in it. His will includes recognizing they are loved by the Father right now, just as they are, right where they are, in the same manner as Jesus was loved by His Father. Loved on earth as they will be loved in heaven. And we also pray that men and women would love on earth as in heaven, which is what Jesus prayed in His High Priestly Prayer.[4]

> I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.
>
> Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.[5]

Of course, because of sin we can only experience a glimpse of that glory, but one day, one day, we will receive fully. Paul writes to the church at Corinth, "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."[6]

[3] Matthew 6.10.
[4] See John 17.
[5] John 17.22-26.
[6] 1 Corinthians 13.12.

Space to Lament and Space to Bless

As noted in Chapter Four the study ended with the viewing of the film, "Heart of Man."[7] The Spirit of God inhabited our classroom in extremely personal and powerful ways that night. One participant commented, "This room has just become holy ground." Tears flowed freely. Cries of lament began to be uttered.

- *"At the end of my fourth-grade year, I was given the award of 'Best Secret Keeper.' I've kept the secret of abuse all these years. Not anymore."* Eric
- *"I've been living a gay lifestyle. I am so broken."* Kandy
- *"I can't break this sexual addiction. It's been years."* Steve
- *"Forgiveness is what I really need to do. I can't."* Bill
- *"I feel so unwanted. I just want to be wanted."* Al
- *"I had no idea how much of a captive I am to fear. I've lived in fear my whole life."* Leon

As the cries began to soften a passage from Lamentations was read.

I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.
I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.
Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."

The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;

[7] Eric Esau. (Director). *The Heart of Man* [Film]. Sypher Studios, 2017.

it is good to wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.[8]

Slowly, we moved from lament to blessing. Each participant in the study was blessed by the laying on of hands and prayer, including the study facilitators. It was holy.

In my twelve years as pastor of Sanctuary, I have never experienced a moment of pure holiness as this one. As we walked to the parking lot still wiping tears from our eyes one participant commented, "Now that was church."

Evaluation and Feedback of Study

The decision to include women in this study was the right decision. It was beautiful to watch men and women heal, with each other, because of each other. While I do believe it is important for there to be spaces set apart based on gender, this study revealed the benefit of the presence of the full Body of Christ. Having both male and female facilitators also gave a "brother/sister" dynamic that helped assuage the fear of a one-sided perspective.

A follow-up qualitative survey was created and given to each participant in the study. The survey included the following questions:

1. What prompted you to participate in the Sexually Redeemed Study?

2. What portion of the study spoke most personally to you?

3. How was your belief as His beloved strengthened?

4. What other comments from the study would you like to share?

The following responses are representative of surveys received:

[8] Lamentations 3.19-26

1. What prompted you to participate in the Sexually Redeemed Study?

It's relevancy to working out our salvation and identity in Christ. The invitation to explore the "whys" behind the "ways" in which we respond sounded like an invitation to healing. Collins

I was prompted to commit to the Sexually Redeemed study purely by the title itself. I have a messy past with this subject and the key word "redeemed" shouted to me: Okay its time and this is the safest place to share hurts brokenness mistakes healing and hope. John

I wanted to learn about sexuality in God's perspective and how God sees it and redeem it. Al

2. What portion of the study spoke most personally to you?

The part of the study that spoke most personally to me was "no fear in love". A large part of my testimony is how I tried to fix my sexuality for years, believing that God did not love me as I am. I thought the abuse I suffered was part of God's wrath pouring out for my many sins. When I finally began to grasp God's love, I realized there is nothing to fear. God is not chasing me with punishment, He is pursuing me with love. Katie

There was a chapter that touched on overcoming fears. It translates for me into a study of reaching and grasping. During this same time, I was reading John Eldridge's "Perseverance". Within that book, there was a chapter on God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit being our Living Water. From there I did a study of all the scriptures that speak of Living Water. Unknown to me, I was in fear, reaching and grasping trying to fill all my broken cisterns. Over the last 7 years, most of the cisterns (joys and comforts of life, relationships, etc.) all have been broken and where once refreshing, replenishing water filled me, they are now broken and empty. Unknowingly, in a human nature need to have such cisterns filled again, out of fear I was reaching and grasping to refill them. To rebuild the cisterns of my life if you will once again with beautiful, life filling, crisp, clear, refreshing water. The Bible study helped me zero in on where I had unintentionally sinned. God said, My people have committed two sins, they have forsaken me, the spring of living water and have dug their own cisterns….Unknowingly, out of fear this is what I was doing. Clark

Each week spoke deeply and connected week to week in a powerful way. By week 5, I received a deeper and redefined meaning of Gods compassion and care for His people. I was able to grasp a bit more of Gods character of being "God with us" in all circumstances; extending grace upon grace. It was powerful to consider Gods care in the midst of working through these wounds and heartaches. It deepened the lens of grace to live by and made way for deeper healing. Collins

Being able to speak authentically about trauma and how it affects how we interact between others, God, and ourselves is crucial in being able to rest in God's love. We tend to only understand what we, ourselves, have experienced. Getting to hear many points of view helps us to relate and understand one another. Steve

3. How was your belief as His beloved strengthened?

My belief was strengthened in being able to receive and rest deeper in the Truth of God being a caring, compassionate Father. A Father who made me able to be healed by the wounds He first bore on my behalf. My belief was strengthened as I took hold a bit more of the truth that He never left and still pursues out of a heart of deep care for me. Collins

My belief as His beloved was radically changed by this study. During the first week, I realized my view of how God saw me was very negative. I felt like He must be so disappointed in me. Going through this study allowed me to better grasp the depth of God's love and forgiveness. It also allowed to embrace my identity as His beloved rather than identifying myself based on my sin, sexuality and temptations. Katie

That I am His beloved and even when I am broken and scared that I am still PERFECTLY LOVED. He created me and loves me for who I am and that will never get taken away no matter how far I stray or run. Al

My "other wound" left me feeling inadequate, "less than," rejected. I compensated by trying whatever I could to be "better" accepted. It only led to more rejection, so I buried my own feelings and accepted the unacceptable. In this study, I came face to face with His complete love, it left me undone. To know that He didn't just "let" me in by His grace, but that He sees me as complete, perfect, cherished and chosen. He seems as His Beloved Bride. Oh, I could say that and truly believed it (for everyone else) and even for me (in my head) but I had never experienced being cherished before and as I said, I was completely undone. Cathy

4. What other comments from the study would you like to share?

I learned recently that "neurobiologically, the person awash in shame is incapable of seeking the very connection that can bring them relief. Someone must come looking for them and teach them the joy of tenderly being found." That's what happened in this study. You came and found me! Leon

I so much appreciated the smallness of the study group, anything more would be intimidating. I appreciated the environment of confidentiality and respect in the group. In the last session when the movie/video was shown I believe we were all blown away by its ability to touch us individually, regardless of why we were there. There was comfort and healing and we were all connected in one room together as one. John

I really enjoyed the way the class was co-taught by Craig and Heather. Your authenticity and empathy was what I was desperate for and didn't even know it. Al

> *God has used this study in a huge way to bring healing to the most broken parts of me. Last night God showed me that tears are a part of the journey. I tend to run and hide when I cry and I was tempted to do that last night but I'm glad I didn't. The people of Sanctuary have shown me that church can be a safe place to be authentic. A group of broken-yet-redeemed people coming together, being vulnerable enough to cry and pray over one another is one of the most humble and beautiful experiences I've been a part of. Saying "thank you" isn't enough to truly express how much gratitude I have for you creating and leading a space where I can be authentic with other Christians and with God. This journey I'm on has just begun and I'm excited to see what else God has in store. I trust that conversations on sexual brokenness will continue and please know that I'm here for it. I will prayerfully share my story of His redemption wherever I am invited and feel led.* Kandy

The feedback from the survey is truly a gift from God. To know many of these stories and to get a front-row seat to see God at work amid pain and brokenness is one of my greatest privileges and highest honors. And, not just in the five weeks of the study, but in the days and weeks to come, and those ahead, I give God praise for His prevailing love in each life, including my own.

For example, A month after the study concluded one of the participants came forward to be baptized. The participant confessed sexual brokenness and shame had held her captive for most of her life. The study helped her see herself anew, whole, and holy. The baptismal was surrounded by members of this study, cheering and advocating for a lost sheep who had come fully come home.

Next Steps

One of the affirming results from the quantitative survey included in Chapter 4 was the number of men (59%) who experience community best “in a small, trusted, committed community.” The above qualitative survey reinforced that truth, and it was certainly our experience in the study.

One of the anchors of our Men's Ministry is "Disciples Making Disciples."[9] *Disciples Making Disciples (DMD)* is a one-year discipleship study intentionally designed to continue the process of personal trans-formation in a small group setting. The desire of the study is to strengthen and grow disciples of Christ, thus preparing them to make disciples of others.

Transformation is the goal of everything we do. We believe it happens best in personal relationships. Our hope is coming out of the Sexually Redeemed study personal relationships have begun and others have deepened enough for men to take the next step into DMD groups.

Invitations to new DMD groups were made throughout the study churchwide as well as personal invitations were given by shepherds who led the small group conversation during the study. We hope to encourage the next step for every man who participates in the study.

Conclusion

In this thesis-project I have sought to engage one of the most difficult areas of belief for many Christian men, shame. Instead of the focus being on men striving, or abstaining, or accountability, this project set out to examine the role of belief, and not just the belief of those who have sinned sexually, but the role of belief in the kingdom of the heavens.

The writing of this thesis was as important as the five-week study it represents. The writing allowed exploration of some spaces that our church doesn't normally journey into, and yet desperately needs to travel toward. The project gave freedom to think again about the theological implications of a few essential church doctrines—like redemption, healing, and transformation--and it gave space to re-examine the role of community.

[9] Craig Bowler, *Disciples Making Disciples,* (Kennesaw, GA: Sanctuary, 2015).

The survey conducted in the research phase of this project gave us an opportunity to learn more about the men in our ministry and the role which the community plays in the process of transformation.

The five-week study allowed for flesh and blood spirituality to arise. Lives were deeply impacted by all who participated. In my twelve years as pastor at Sanctuary, this has been the most important contribution to date.

Additionally, the five-week study has now been shared with four other churches in our neighborhood, and at one denominational Men's retreat, allowing the message of redemption to continue to spread.

Epilogue

Jason gives me an affirming smile as I enter his office and sit on the couch. I grab a Lifesaver from the basket on the side table.

"How are you doing, Craig? Haven't seen you in a while. Nice to have you join us, Kristy. Glad you came with Craig today. What's going on guys? How can I help?"

"Thanks for seeing me, Jason. I'm struggling." Kristy gently rubs my leg.

"He's not been sleeping well," she says.

He smiles at Kristy and looks back at me, "Struggling with what?"

I unwrap the Lifesaver and pop it in my mouth. "Man, I don't know, the church, relational stuff with the staff and elders, my girls being gone, a little disconnected from Kristy. And this thing with Matt Chandler just freaks me out." I lean back and sigh. Then throw the Lifesaver wrapper in the trash.

"Start there. What about Matt Chandler?"

“It’s the whole thing about him having to take a leave of absence. Apparently, he was texting with a woman who was not his wife. The language used in the article I read was that his texting, though not sexual was deemed as ‘too familiar and too frequent.’”

Jason’s very aware of Kristy’s presence, but not looking at her. “Keep going.”

“I don’t know Matt Chandler, I have no idea about any of this, but it’s that the elders get to decide what’s ‘too frequent,’ what’s ‘too familiar.’”

“And that bothers you, because…”

Tears well up in my eyes, “It bothers me because the elders get to decide what’s right or wrong for Matt.”

Kristy leans in wanting to say something but pauses and looks at Jason.

“I can see this is upsetting you, Craig. What’s causing so much emotion?”

“I don’t know, man. It just triggered something in me.”

“What did it trigger, Craig?” Jason asks.

“I don’t know what it triggered, maybe that’s why I’m here. I’ve just been overwhelmed with a pervasive sense of always being wrong.”

“Are you wrong? Are you doing something wrong?”

Kristy looks at me confidently, “It’s okay, babe.”

“It’s the same stuff, Jason. For some reason, nothing in particular…I wish there was something…I haven’t done anything crazy, there’s no big confession here…I’m just tired of being wrong all of the time.”

Jason nods, shuffles a little, and smiles, “So what do you think you’re dealing with?”

“It’s what I always deal with…shame.”

He nods affirmingly. Kristy too.

Then he says, “Let’s talk about it. Let’s start with what you’re believing today.”

APPENDIX ONE: SEX AND SEXUALITY STATEMENT

The following statement aims to provide a wholistic and elevated view of sex that honors God's intentions and design for human sexuality while standing in contrast to views that relegate sex to a bodily act devoid of any spiritual meaning. This statement distinguishes what Scripture affirms and upholds about the meaning and purposes of sex in the Christian worldview, not merely what we deny or understand as mere transgression.

THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST IN SEX AND SEXUALITY

We confess that Jesus Christ is Lord over all things, including sex (1 Corinthians 6:13). Therefore, our understanding of sex and sexuality is received from God through Scripture as our final authority for belief and practice (1 Thessalonians 4:8). Non-biblical interpretations of sex and sexuality, which interpret sex in terms of human authority, are at odds with the Lordship of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:3–5). They must be critiqued and resisted by God's people. The Lordship of Christ compels all of His followers to believe and live by the following in regard to sex and sexuality.

GOD'S TRIFOLD DESIGN OF SEX AND SEXUALITY

God's purpose for sexual union includes a trifold design consisting of three dimensions that are intertwined, interdependent, and complementary: the consummation of the marriage covenant, procreation, and pleasure.

Sex consummates marriage as the physical sign and seal of the covenantal partnership (Genesis 2:18) or marital love (Malachi 2:14), creating a new family unit (Genesis 2:23– 24; Ephesians 5:31). It is the sign act that ratifies and continually affirms the ongoing exclusive life commitment and love (Song of Songs 2:16; 1 Corinthians 7:39) between two persons, male and female, as one flesh (Genesis 2:24–25; Song of Songs 8:6–7; Matthew 19:4–6).

Sex is for procreation (Malachi 2:15), fulfilling the mandate to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28), by which the one-flesh union of husband and wife creates a new, holy life (1 Corinthians 7:14) and ensouled body.

Sex is a unique expression of the human experience of intimacy (Song of Songs 4:16) and pleasure (Song of Songs 1:4). It is an expression of our design in the image of a relational God (John 17:21–23) which reflects His wholehearted love and forwards His intentions for humans to experience the pleasure of relational and physical intimacy (Song of Songs 5:4–5).

GOD'S PURPOSE FOR SEX AND SEXUALITY

We believe that sex is one expression of the many ways God has created us in His image. We believe that God has created human beings as male and female (Genesis 1:27) and that our sexuality is an expression of His unique capacity for relationship, as is found in the Trinity. As a result, we believe there are specific implications for sex and sexuality, as we are made in the image of a Triune God according to His specific design.

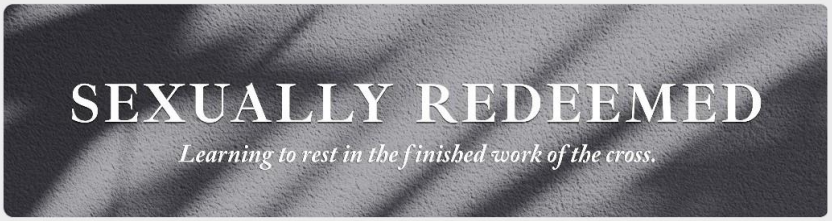
Sex and sexuality are good and holy (Genesis 2:23–24; Hebrews 13:4). We believe that our desire for sex and our sexuality reflects how we are made in the image of a Triune God who exists in the relationship between Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit (John 17:21), and that human sexuality reflects the relational intimacy and capacity of God.

We understand that sex is an expression of how God has designed us but is not essential to our meaningful existence. Life is meaningful and good without sex (John 10:10; 1 Corinthians 7:1). In our future resurrected state, sex and marriage will be no more (Matthew 22:30). Sex, as a sacramental sign of the divine-human relationship, becomes unnecessary upon the consummation of the marital union of Christ and us, His bride (Ephesians 5:31–32; Revelation 19:7).

Like all creation, we believe that sex and sexuality have been distorted by the fall of mankind (sin's impact on disfiguring God's design). These fallen expressions of sex or sexuality begin in the mind in the form of lust and are externalized as outward actions of the body. They include adultery, pornography, polygamy, premarital sex, homosexual sex, sexual assault or abuse, pedophilia, bestiality, incest, and the like (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 19:29; Romans 1:26–27; 1 Thessalonians 4:3–7; Hebrews 13:4). We believe that expressions of sexuality such as these are not part of God's design.

AFFIRMATION OF SEX AND SEXUALITY

We affirm that the proper Scriptural context for the expression of human sexuality can take place only within the boundaries of a monogamous marriage between a biological man and a biological woman. Only within the context of this marriage can the sexual relationship take place without violating God's Scriptural design and purpose. In this context, it fulfills the purposes of sex as an expression of permanent and exclusive commitment until death, open to the possibility of conceiving a child, and enjoying the pleasures of intimacy. Furthermore, we believe that sex within the covenant of an exclusive heterosexual marriage is a temporary symbol which points to the second coming of Christ. When Jesus returns, He will unite God with all His people in the same way sex unites two different human beings (a man and a woman) in one human union. From this biblical-theological understanding, Sanctuary draws its grace-filled teaching and practice on sex and sexuality.



Survey

General Information

adele.bowler@gmail.com (not shared) Switch account

Age

- [ ] 18-24
- [ ] 25-34
- [ ] 35-44
- [ ] 45-54
- [ ] 55-65
- [ ] 65+

Marital Status

- ( ) Single
- ( ) Married
- ( ) Divorced
- ( ) Widowed

Do you have children?

- ( ) Yes
- ( ) No

Community

Do you currently work on a church staff?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

How regularly do you attend Sunday worship gatherings?

- ◯ Once a week
- ◯ Twice a month
- ◯ Once a month
- ◯ A few times a year
- ◯ Not at all

How regularly do you participate in a small group?

- ◯ Once a week
- ◯ Twice a month
- ◯ Once a month
- ◯ A few times a year
- ◯ Not at all

In what kind of community do you learn best?

- ◯ I don't learn much in community.
- ◯ In a community of like-minded men.
- ◯ In a diverse community.
- ◯ In a small, trusted, committed community.

Evaluate your current experience in community.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very content	○	○	○	○	○	Discontent

I feel truly known by at least one person in my church.

- ○ True
- ○ False

I don't share my story anyone/ I don't have anyone with whom to share my story.

- ○ True
- ○ False

I would be afraid to let someone know my full sexual story.

- ○ True
- ○ False

There is someone in my church who knows my sexual story, including the current chapter.

- ○ True
- ○ False

Intimacy

How intimate is your relationship with God?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very intimate	○	○	○	○	○	No intimacy

How intimate is your relationship with your spouse? (If not married, consider your closest relationship.)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very intimate	○	○	○	○	○	No intimacy

How intimate are you with your current friends?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very intimate	○	○	○	○	○	No intimacy

Sexual Health

At what age did you begin to see your body as sexual?

- ○ 0-5
- ○ 6-9
- ○ 10-14
- ○ 15-19

At what age did you have your first sexual experience?

- ○ 0-5
- ○ 6-9
- ○ 10-14
- ○ 15-19

Diagnose the health of your current sexual experience.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Healthy	○	○	○	○	○	Shame filled

Are you currently struggling with any unwanted sexual behavior?

	1	2	3	4	5	
No struggle	○	○	○	○	○	Constant struggle

How often do you view pornography?

- ○ More than once a week.
- ○ Once a week.
- ○ Twice a month.
- ○ Once a month.
- ○ A few times a year.
- ○ Not at all.

Have you ever participated in an extra-marital affair?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

In regard to sexual brokenness, do you believe there is hope to heal, to change and grow?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Full belief	○	○	○	○	○	Unbelief

How do you believe God views your sexual story?

- ○ With compassion.
- ○ With frustration.
- ○ With fatigue.

What do you believe about your sexual story?

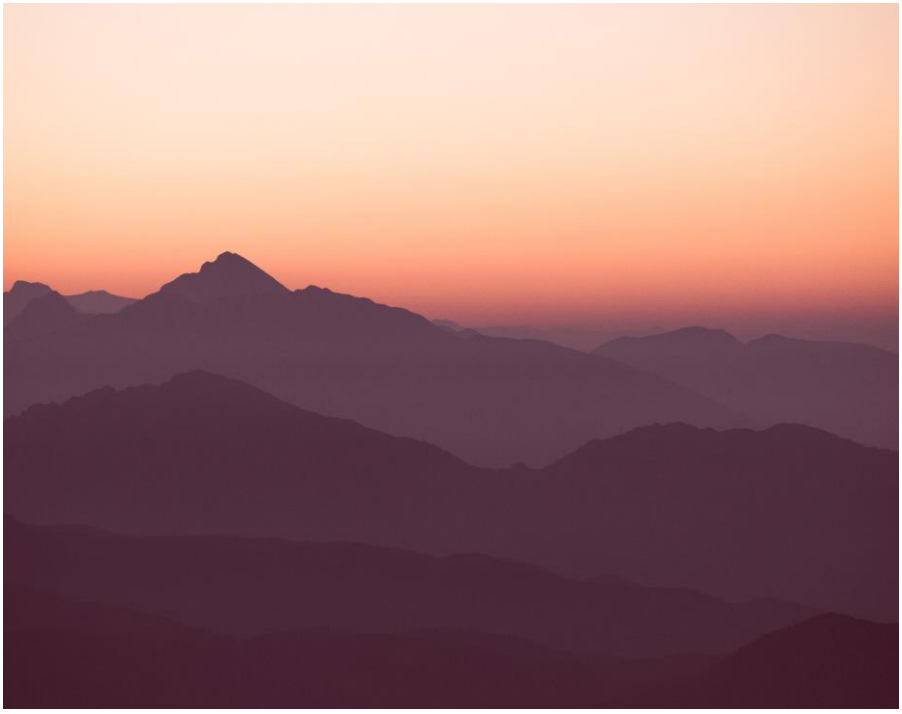
- ◯ I'm permanently broken.
- ◯ I'm striving to make progress.
- ◯ I'm healing.
- ◯ I'm healed, whole and holy.

Submit

Clear form

SEXUALLY REDEEMED

LEARNING TO REST IN THE FINISHED WORK OF THE CROSS



Sexually Redeemed: Learning to Rest in the Finished Work of the Cross
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700 Mars Hill Road, Kennesaw, GA 30152

Our Purpose: At Sanctuary, we are being transformed by the gospel to live and love like Jesus.

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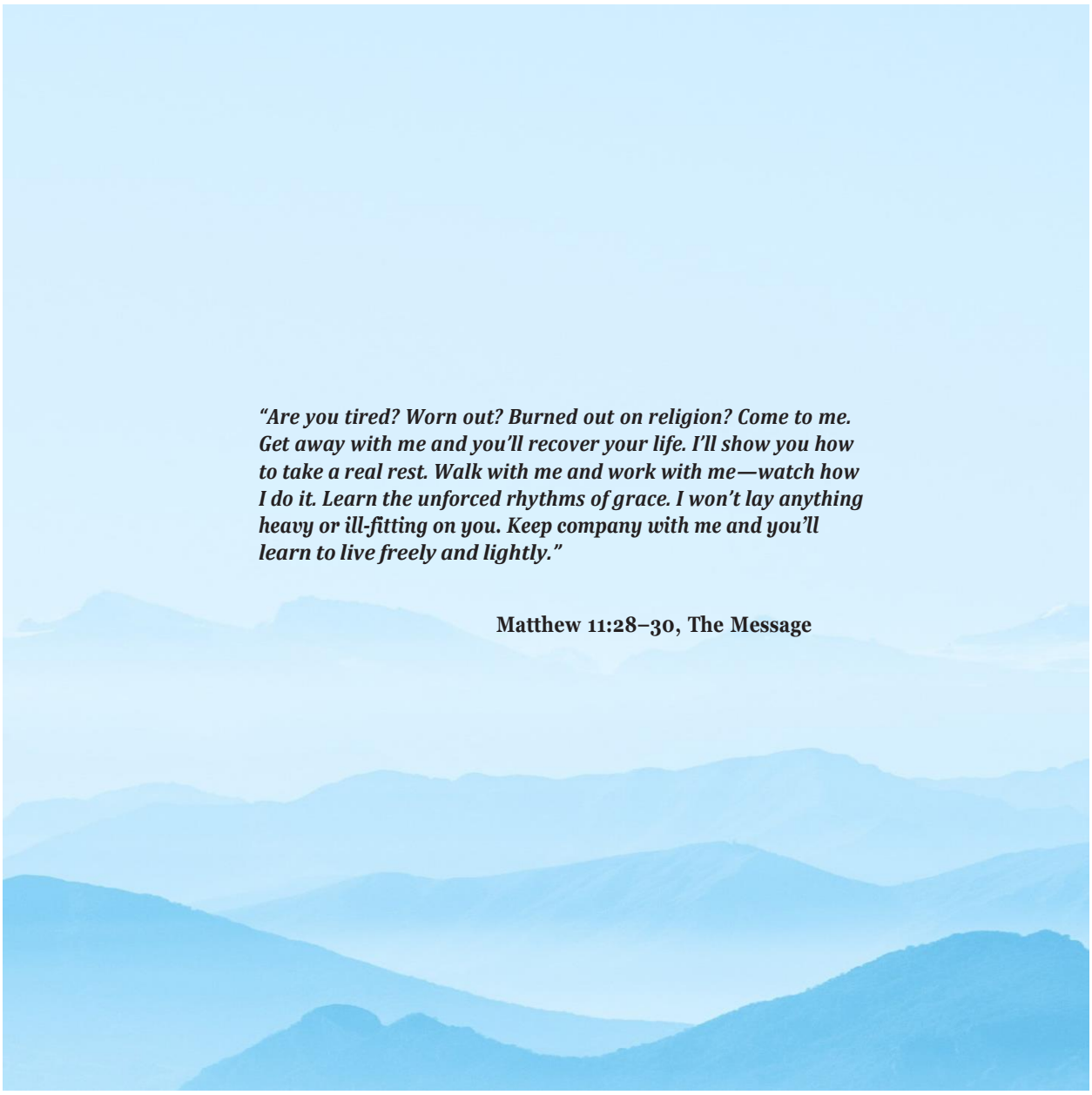

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Matthew 11:28–30, The Message

INTRODUCTION

This study is about God. This study is about you. This study is about God's indescribable love for you, a love so deep, so profound, so all-encompassing that He made a way for you to be able to say, "I am His beloved with whom He is well pleased." And it's a study we believe will cause you to fall more in love with Him.

It won't just happen. But you don't have to go looking for anything. You won't have to get sober or discover some new insight. Not with this kind of love.

This study will require something of you. It will require a willingness, a desire, a vulnerability to say, "Yes," and the openness to receive the love Jesus has for you. The love that is here, now, available, and accessible, a love so intimate and present, a love so incomprehensibly beautiful. A love that receives you just as you are, right where you are.

Saying yes will mean facing the lie of shame. It will mean believing (even in a space of unbelief) that His way for you, and for those around you, is best. It will mean agreeing that His truth is true. It will mean fully embracing what's already been done, what's already been given.

At the heart of the gospel, we see that our brokenness doesn't separate us from the love of God. It connects us. Jesus asked a man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years a very simple question: "Do you want to get well?" (John 5:6)

As Christians, our reality is that Jesus has already made us well. We are redeemed. We are healed, whole, and holy. We are at once belonging and becoming. Our great challenge is learning to rest in what Jesus accomplished on the cross, learning to live

in the reality of our healing, and learning to give and receive love in the beauty of our holiness.

The paralyzed man responds to Jesus' question with an excuse: "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred" (John 5:7). Jesus moves past the man's excuse and says to him—and to you and me—"Get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (John 5:8).

What do you say? Let's learn to receive and to rest. Let's learn to walk it out together.

Love you guys,
cb

5

WEEK ONE
IT IS FINISHED

PART ONE

It is finished.

From the cross, Jesus declared victory over sin and death.

> ***Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.***
> **John 19:30**

What was finished? What did Jesus finish on the cross? A better question may be, "What didn't Jesus finish?" Or maybe an even better question is, "What started—what began—after Jesus finished paying our penalty, resulting in the ultimate end of sin and death?"

It is finished.

"Finished"—*téleios*—meaning "fully finished" or "accomplished to the uttermost."

Jesus made atonement for our sin. His whole life pointed to this one moment, the moment of atonement. It was in this moment, the moment when the wrath of God was poured upon Jesus instead of us—His body fully broken, His blood fully shed—that it was accomplished to the uttermost. In the words of John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner, when he saw the Savior coming toward him: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

Jesus provides a way to atone for our sins. Jesus completes it. Accomplishes it. Not in defeat; please, this is not defeat. In an act of heroic triumph, He screams, "It is finished."

We get used to talking about the cross. But friend, what happened on the cross is the

single most important event in redemptive history. What God did on the cross is treat Jesus Christ as if He had committed every single sin ever committed by every single person. The full wrath of God was placed on His Son instead of on you and me.

God the Father is treating His Son as if He had lived your life. And in return, He is able to treat you as if you had lived Jesus' perfect life.

It is finished.

The work of reconciling your relationship with God is finished. What Jesus did completely justifies you. What Jesus accomplished completely redeems you, because He is your perfect sacrifice. And because of that, God is completely and utterly pleased with you. On the cross, Jesus declared a complete victory on your behalf, covering all your sins.

All your sins. Your past sexual sin…your current sexual sin…your future sexual sin. It has all been redeemed.

It is finished.

REFLECTION

1. What did Jesus finish on your behalf?

9

2. What did Jesus leave undone?

3. Reflect on this statement: "God is completely and utterly pleased with you." How are you learning to rest in this truth? What causes you to push back from fully embracing this truth?

4. How about you? Are you "completely and utterly pleased" with yourself? What is the primary belief you have about yourself—or about the cross—that might cause you to pray, "I believe; help my unbelief"?

PART TWO

It is finished. Here's how it started.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

‘ Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground,
e but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground.
’ Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

8 Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. 9 The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹9 A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. ¹¹ The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹2 (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) ¹³ The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. ¹4 The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹‘ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹e And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹’ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

12

18 The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

19 Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. 20 So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. 21 So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. 22 Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

23 The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."

24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

25 Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. **Genesis 2:4–25**

To describe the perfection of garden life and garden love, the biblical writer uses a two-phrase sentence: "Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame."

They were both naked. Not just physically, but in fullness as created beings. Nakedness here represents complete and total innocence and integrity. There was no vulnerability is this state of nakedness, nothing to be afraid of or exploited. In this state of perfection,

13

nothing was hidden, nothing in their bodies, minds, or souls. Nakedness was a state of complete freedom.

In his book *The Divine Romance*, Gene Edwards paints the picture this way:

> "They are never distracted from one another, for there is no distraction. In their eyes, nothing else exists!
>
> "She has no blemish; she has no wrinkle. There is nothing imperfect in all her being.
>
> "He loves her continuously. And with abandoned, innocent, unbridled passion, she loves him in return.
>
> "She has full confidence in her place beside him. No reassurances need be given that he loves her. She never questions, but totally accepts his love. There is no fear of displeasing him or losing him.
>
> "She is beautiful, she knows that, yet there is no pride. Rather, a deep inward knowing that he is lord of all earth, and she is . . . his perfect mate."[1]

"And they felt no shame." In their complete oneness was full transparency.

To describe utter beauty, the writer of the text uses the negation of a word of utter vileness. Shame is universal; every person knows shame is poison; it's prison. The writer chooses the word "shame" to describe what is not in the garden. Adam and Eve are without shame.

Shame enters the garden at the fall. The consequence is devastating. Shame enters the

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hearts of the man and woman, their minds and their souls now fueling every sin-soaked response.

> ***When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ' Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.*** **Genesis 3:6–7**

Shame now rules Adam and Eve. In response to its reign over them, they realize they are naked and try to cover up their nakedness. They cover up to self-protect—from God, from each other, and from their truest selves.

You know shame. You know its power. You know its weight. You know its shape and tone and misery. Shame is the belief and the ongoing threat that the truest part of you is unlovable. Shame says you didn't just do something bad; you are bad.

There is no other sin that carries the constant threat of shame like sexual sin. All sin separates; that's what sin does. But make no mistake, our sexual sin is set apart. Paul implores the church at Corinth:

> ***Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body***. **1 Corinthians 6:18**

Shame whispers to you that you are worthless and unlovable because you look at pornography. Shame reminds you that you are bad, and you will never change.

You are not worthless because you look at pornography. Rather, because you feel you are worthless, you are drawn to pornography. But sexual sin is not the unforgivable sin. It's just not. On the cross, Jesus exchanged grace for shame. You are not worthless; you are worthy. Let me say it again. You are not worthless. You are His beloved.

15

Friends, God approaches us in our nakedness to bring us joy, not to express His disappointment in us. His heart is to exchange our ashes for beauty, our mourning for joy, and our despair for praise (see Isaiah 61:3). There is no shame so deep that the love of God cannot reach it. There is no story He cannot redeem. The paradox of the gospel is that our failures do not condemn us; they connect us.

REFLECTION

1. What is God's created intent for your sexuality?

2. How do you sense God approaching you to heal your sexual brokenness?

3. Reflect on this statement: "The paradox of the gospel is that our failures do not condemn us; they connect us." How are you learning to rest in this truth? What causes you to push back from fully embracing this truth?

4. Describe your posture in engaging with God as His beloved.

WEEK ONE EXERCISE: FINAL WORD

The Final Word Project is curated by Brady Smith. The project originated with the desire to photograph the ultimate substance of life. Brady invited his friends, and today we invite you, to come to an understanding of God's Final Word.

Take your time to work through the following questions to help you come to God's Final Word. The following photographs will give you a glimpse into how others described God's Final Word.

1. Do you believe in God?

2. What do you think of God?

3. What are some things God might think of you?

4. What are the top three words God might use to describe you?

19

5. What is the one thing you think God most often says about you? Write that word on the duct tape below.

20

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ… **Romans 8:16–17a**

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REFLECTION

1. Which photo speaks most personally to you?

2. What is the primary reason you chose the word you wrote on the duct tape?

3. How does that word, that belief, get expressed through your body, mind, and soul?

4. How might your friends around the table encourage you to lean into the truth that you are God's beloved?

SEXUALLY REDEEMED—MY STORY

When did you first come to recognize you had a body?

_____

_____

_____

When did you begin to see your body as sexual?

_____

_____

_____

DISCUSSION

> *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*
> **Matthew 11:28–30**

> *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.* **James 5:16**

Share as God leads. Use the following questions if they will be helpful.

1. **How do you receive Jesus' invitation to come to Him? Why is He inviting you in?**
2. **What is causing you to be weary and burdened?**
3. **What is currently bringing you life that leads to rest?**
4. **"And you will find rest for your soul." How might you live in that truth today?**
5. **How might your friends around the table join you in prayer and presence?**

BENEDICTION—DAVID INNES

Oh Lord, my God and my Redeemer,

Thank You for saving me, Jesus. Thank You for Your complete forgiveness. Thank You for being my advocate before the Father. Thank You, Holy Spirit, for uttering groans of intercession when I have no words to pray.

You have never left me nor forsaken me as I have walked through relational brokenness. You have comforted me in the valley of the shadow of death, being merciful and kind and protecting me from the deadly intent of evil.

I am grateful today, Father, for the sacrifice You made because You first loved me and are actively at work in my healing,

While I remain prone to selfishness and, in my weariness, lack the faith needed to believe, it is my identity in You alone that brings me hope, the hope of an ultimate victory.

So today, as I strive to embrace the truth of who You are and the vastness of Your love, mercy, and grace, help me also realize that my choices matter to You and to others who cross my path on this journey. As You continue to heal and change me, Jesus, help me to live and make choices from a position of utter gratitude.

I long for the faith to believe You are absolutely enough for me and that I need no one or nothing else. Please strengthen me, Lord, to have the courage to rest in You and not in myself. Your love will never fail me.

Hallelujah!

Amen.

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But now, this is what the Lord says—
he who created you, Jacob,
he who formed you, Israel:
"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
3 For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
I give Egypt for your ransom,
Cush and Seba in your stead. **Isaiah 43:1–7**

WEEK TWO
BY HIS WOUNDS WE ARE HEALED

PART ONE

But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed. **Isaiah 53:5**

"By His wounds we are healed."

He was wounded because of our sin. He was crushed because of our shame. He became our sin so we could experience His peace. Although our sexual brokenness has ultimately been healed, God is inviting us to learn to actively live and love in the healing of our Wounded Healer.

For many of us, learning to live and love in our healing will require us to "unlearn" both some of the ways we've lived and loved in our past and some of the ways in which we are currently living and loving. This "unlearning" includes considering not just the way we love others, but the way we receive the love of others. Our woundedness is the primary roadblock keeping us from moving out of the cul-de-sac of brokenness to live in the openness and adventure of healing.

We are wounded by the sins of others as well as by our own self-inflicted sins. Those who are most deeply wounded are the ones who perpetuate the cycle, continually recreating a society of wounded people. A young man at Sanctuary recently summarized this cycle in one sentence.

"My dad beat religion into me, and then he beat it out of me."

All wounds come as a result of the fall. For many of us, our wounds can be traced back to three places on the roadmap of our lives.

1. **Our own sin.**
2. **A "father wound" or "mother wound."**
3. **An "other wound," or a wound at the hands of another.**

Let's learn and unlearn from David, a man after God's own heart.

> ***"But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command."*** **1 Samuel 13:14**
>
> ***The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."***
>
> ***2 But Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me."***
>
> ***The LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' 3 Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate."***
>
> ***4 Samuel did what the LORD said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, "Do you come in peace?"***
>
> ***' Samuel replied, "Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me." Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.***
>
> ***e When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD."***
>
> ***' But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I***

29

have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." 9 Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, "Nor has the LORD chosen this one." 10 Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, "The LORD has not chosen these." 11 So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?"

"There is still the youngest," Jesse answered. "He is tending the sheep."

Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives."

12 So he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features.

Then the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one."

13 So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David. Samuel then went to Ramah. **1 Samuel 16:1–13**

Of this text, Charles Swindoll writes:

> **It's remarkable, isn't it, how Jesse reveals two very common mistakes parents make. Number one, he didn't have an equal appreciation for all of his children. And number two, he failed to cultivate a mutual self-respect among them. Jesse saw his youngest as nothing more than the one who tended the sheep.[2]**

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their wounds. Young boys are instilled with an instinctive need to have their identity and worthiness seen, shaped, and affirmed by their parents. When this longing remains unmet, a wound is inflicted and remains open, serving as a primal guide throughout their lives.

John Lynch summarizes a "father wound" this way: "A lack of blessing we expected or anticipated from a father or father-type figure. 'Someone important to you consistently choosing not to love you.'"

Similarly, Stasi Eldredge encourages us to consider the "mother wound." Eldredge says children receive their sense of identity from their father or father figure while the sense of worthiness is instilled by their mothers. In her book *Becoming Myself*, Eldredge writes:

> **Mothers bestow our self-worth, and they have the ability to withhold it. Intentionally, but more often unintentionally. A mother cannot pass on what she does not possess...Mothers have the ability to withhold acceptance, value, love. Our mothers failed us when, without meaning to, they passed on to us low self-esteem. Or based our self-worth on anything other than the fact that we exist.**[3]

These first two wounds, when not healed, stunt a person's ability to give and receive love. When left unhealed, that man will not only live in a perpetual state of immaturity; he will also stunt the maturity of his children at the very same level.

David includes this cry of his heart in Psalm 27.

> ***Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.*** **Psalm 27:10**

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REFLECTION

1. Describe your greatest pressure point in learning to live and love in God's healing.

2. How do you sense your earliest wounds may have been inflicted?

3. What is the basis of your identity and self-worth?

4. How do you sense God inviting you to further receive His affirmation, blessing, and rest?

PART TWO

David ultimately ascends to the throne. He becomes the most powerful man in the land. As a warrior king, he leads and loves God's people, yet he continues to choose to live in his brokenness rather than in his healing. His wounds have devastating effects on others. Here's one chapter of his story.

In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.

2 One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, 3 and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite." 4 Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (Now she was purifying herself from her monthly uncleanness.) Then she went back home. ' The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, "I am pregnant."

e So David sent this word to Joab: "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent him to David. ' When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were and how the war was going. 8 Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." So Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him. 9 But Uriah slept at the entrance to the palace with all his master's servants and did not go down to his house.

19 David was told, "Uriah did not go home." So he asked Uriah, "Haven't you just come from a military campaign? Why didn't you go home?"

35

11 Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my commander Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!"

12 Then David said to him, "Stay here one more day, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. 13 At David's invitation, he ate and drank with him, and David made him drunk. But in the evening Uriah went out to sleep on his mat among his master's servants; he did not go home.

14 In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. 1" In it he wrote, "Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die."

1e So while Joab had the city under siege, he put Uriah at a place where he knew the strongest defenders were. 1' When the men of the city came out and fought against Joab, some of the men in David's army fell; moreover, Uriah the Hittite died.

18 Joab sent David a full account of the battle. 19 He instructed the messenger: "When you have finished giving the king this account of the battle, 29 the king's anger may flare up, and he may ask you, 'Why did you get so close to the city to fight? Didn't you know they would shoot arrows from the wall? 21 Who killed Abimelek son of Jerub-Besheth? Didn't a woman drop an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died in Thebez? Why did you get so close to the wall?' If he asks you this, then say to him, 'Moreover, your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead.'"

22 The messenger set out, and when he arrived he told David everything Joab had sent him to say. 23 The messenger said to David, "The men overpowered us and came out against us in the open, but we drove them back to the entrance of the city gate. 24 Then the archers shot arrows at your servants from the wall, and some of the king's men died.

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Moreover, your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead."

2‘ David told the messenger, "Say this to Joab: 'Don't let this upset you; the sword devours one as well as another. Press the attack against the city and destroy it.' Say this to encourage Joab."

2e When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. 2’ After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the LORD*.*
2 Samuel 11

In Part One, we identified father wounds and mother wounds as two sources of our brokenness. In this text, we see another wound forcefully described: "other wounds."

David, a man after God's own heart, lived in a stunted level of maturity. And from that place, he inflicted the greatest kind of damage.

Consider Bathsheba's immense pain. We often read 2 Samuel 11 in light of David's story; the text, however, reads quite differently from Bathsheba's perspective.

We don't know Bathsheba's posture after being summoned to the palace. We only know of David's crushing brutality following this encounter.

While the father and mother wounds are caused by something being withheld, the "other wound" is caused by something being taken, innocence being stolen, vulnerabilitybeing abused, a soul being shattered.

Learning to live in the healing Jesus came to bring doesn't happen in a five-week study. For some, the excruciating trauma of an "other wound" is something we'll continue to learn or unlearn every day for the rest of our lives.

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REFLECTION

1. How does reading this text from Bathsheba's perspective change the way you view her story, David's story, and the overall story of God in 2 Samuel 11?

2. Where and when have you experienced an "other wound?" How are you learning to live in the healing of such indescribable pain?

3. This whole story is eventually laid bare. Our stories, too, will one day be open for all to see. The details included in the text are in plain sight, but the wounds are not. What wounds have you inflicted, or what wounds have been inflicted upon you, that you continue to keep hidden?

4. What one part of your story do you need to unlearn? What part of your story will you live with every day for the rest of your life? Who joins you there?

WEEK TWO EXERCISE: HERE I GO AGAIN

Here I Go Again is a description of a shame cycle. There are various kinds of cycles, all with differing causes and outcomes. In our context, a shame cycle is initiated when an open wound is punched, touched, or even grazed. Shame cycles can also occur in places where wounds have been healed. Because shame doesn't follow any logical reaction, even healed places can become susceptible to being reopened.

Using the cycle below as an example, write out your own cycle.

HERE I GO AGAIN
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS STUNTED
WOUNDED OR WOUND REOPENED
ILLUSION OF LIFE BACK TO NORMAL
INITIAL TEMPTATION
DESPERATE PRAYER OF CONFESSION (NOT REPENTANCE)
REPLAY FAILURES RELIVE WOUNDS
FEEL WORSE
SELF SOOTHE ACTING OUT PLAYING OUT
TEMPTATION

Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Then you will be able to test and approve what God's
will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.
Romans 12:2

In his book *Unwanted: How Sexual Brokenness Reveals Our Way to Healing*, Jay Stringer writes these powerful words:

> Unwanted sexual behavior is not primarily an attempt to remedy or self-soothe the pain of a wounded child. It is attempting to reenact the formative stories of trauma, abuse, and shame that convinced us we were unwanted to begin with. In other words, we are not addicted primarily to sex or even a disordered intimacy; instead, we are bonded to feelings of shame and judgment.
>
> In this way, unwanted sexual behavior is not seeking medication but rather a familiar poison to deaden our imagination that something could change for the better.[4]

REFLECTION

Examine your story, shame cycle, and Stringer's words, and then answer the following questions.

1. What in your story needs to be shared in order for you to learn to live freely and lightly?

2. What is the "familiar poison that deadens your imagination?"

3. Do you believe God can change you for the better? If so, what is your starting place in this journey?

4. What is it you are really afraid of?

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your

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SEXUALLY REDEEMED—MY STORY

What emotions accompanied your earliest sexual experience?

What emotions accompany your sexual experience today?

DISCUSSION

> *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest· 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*
> **Matthew 11:28–30**

> *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.* **James 5:16**

Share as God leads. Use the following questions if they will be helpful.

1. **How do you receive Jesus' invitation to come to Him? Why is He inviting you in?**
2. **What is causing you to be weary and burdened?**
3. **What is currently bringing you life that leads to rest?**
4. **"And you will find rest for your soul." How might you live in that truth today?**
5. **How might your friends around the table join you in prayer and presence?**

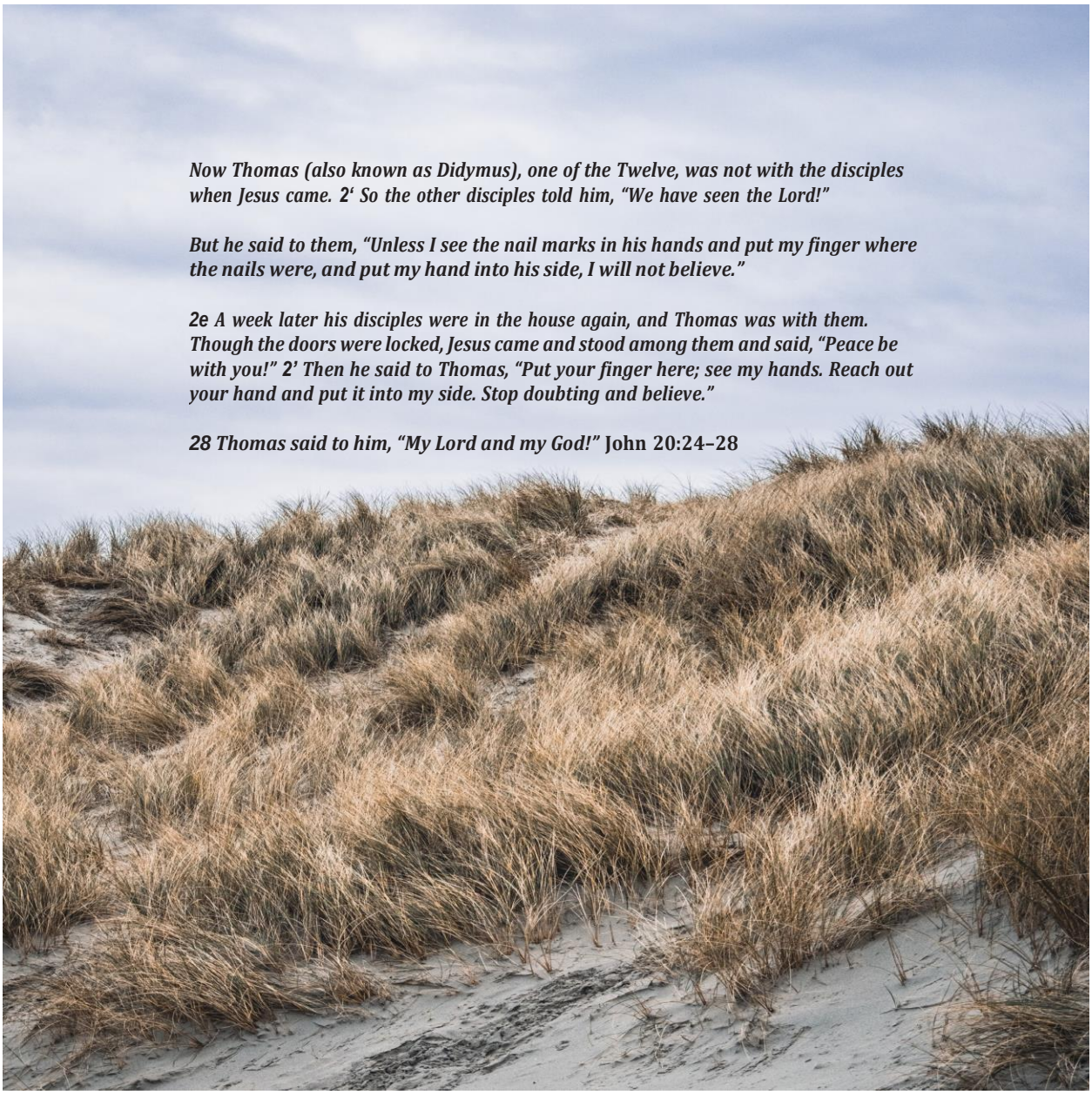
BENEDICTION—DAVID COSTON

Father, for some of us that word—"father"—may not bring comfort. But it is You, our Lord and Savior, our Heavenly Father, who redeems us and heals our wounds.

Father God, we thank You today for this gathering of men. I pray that You will reveal the wounds that burden us. It can be difficult, even painful to admit that we have been wounded. Allow us to let down our guards in this place and in this fellowship. Allow us to lay down these burdens at the foot of the cross. Allow us to be healed in this moment as we remember that Jesus was wounded and crushed for our sins. He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped and we were healed. Thank You for that truth, Father. You know our hearts; each man here carries the scars of our fallen world, and You alone can heal our wounds.

Be with each of us as we go forward in the light of Your transforming love. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

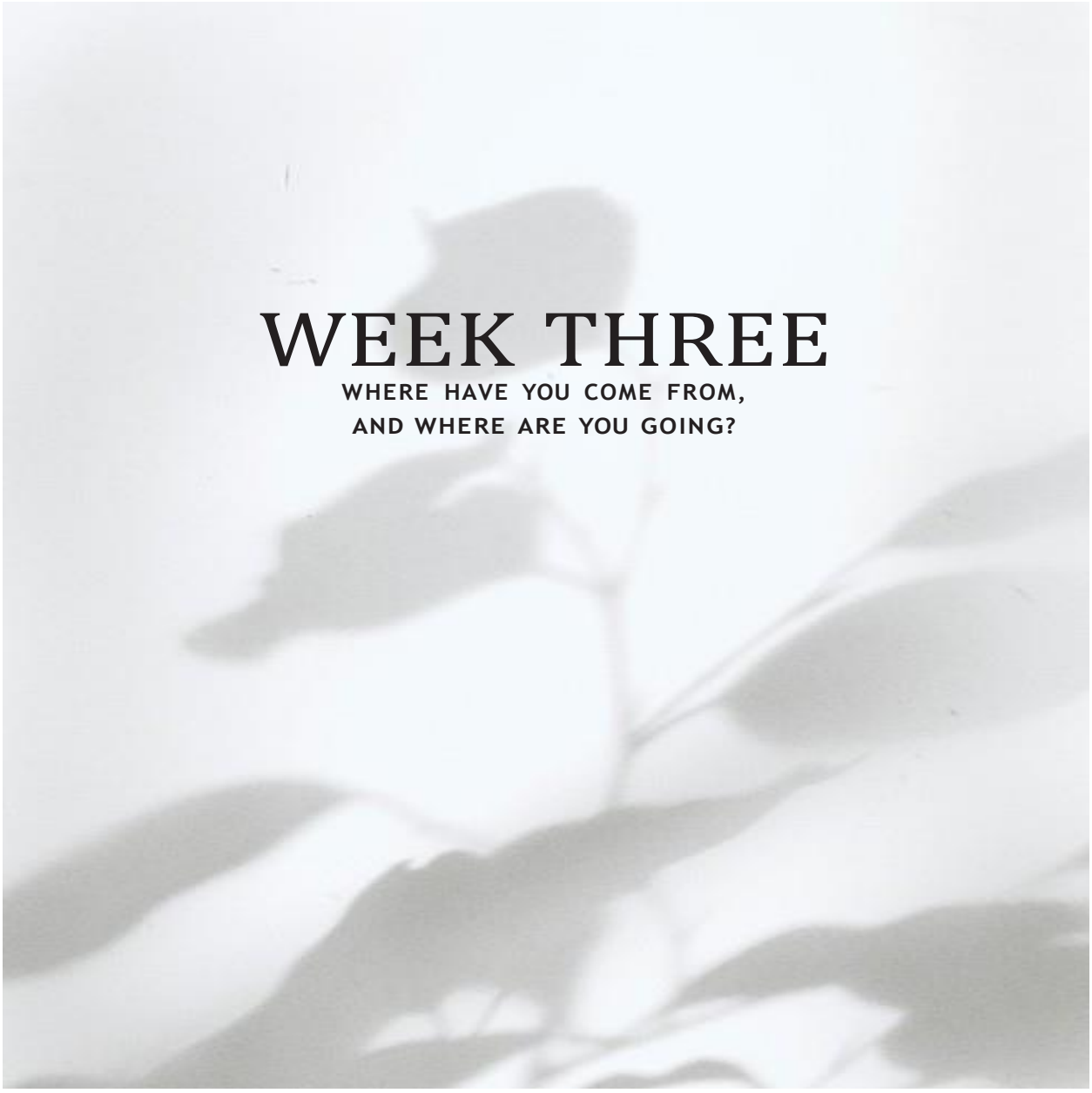


Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ***2****‘ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”*

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

2e *A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”* ***2’*** *Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”*

28 *Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”* **John 20:24–28**



WEEK THREE

WHERE HAVE YOU COME FROM, AND WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

PART ONE

The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered. **Genesis 16:7–8**

We'll learn more about Hagar in a moment. Let's start in the middle of her story.

Hagar, whose name in Hebrew means "flight," has fled from the biblical heroes-to-be, Abram and Sarai, and run away to the desert. In Scripture, the desert or wilderness is often the geography of trauma and death. Hagar runs to the wilderness. And here is where God meets her with the most staggering question.

"Where have you come from, and where are you going?"

The following statistics regarding sexual brokenness paint a clear picture:

- **Approximately 35% of all internet downloads are porn related.**
- **Porn sites receive more monthly traffic than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined.**
- **47% of US families report pornography is a problem in their homes. The use of porn increases the rate of infidelity by 300+%.**
- **One in three women watches porn at least once a week.**
- **68% of churchgoing men view pornography on a regular basis.**
- **57% of senior pastors and 64% of youth pastors admit to struggling with pornography use.**
- **40% of adult Christians believe pastors who struggle with pornography should be fired or asked to resign.[5]**

Pornography is one of the enemy's deadliest tools. Deeper still, the enemy wants to rule and protect the reason why we run away to pornography. The enemy knows if that deeper wound could be healed, our compulsion to run to pornography would change.

This is how Hagar's story begins.

> ***Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; 2 so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her."***
>
> ***Abram agreed to what Sarai said. 3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. 4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.***
>
> ***When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me."***
>
> ***"Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.*** **Genesis 16:1–6**

Here's what we know from just a quick read of the text. Hagar is an Egyptian slave. She is given to Abram by his wife Sarai, hoping Hagar will conceive a child so Abram's lineage will begin. Hagar becomes pregnant, and Sarai becomes indignant in her suffering.

> ***Then Sarai mistreated Hagar.***

"Mistreat" means "to afflict, to oppress, to treat harshly, to abuse."

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So she fled from her.

Back to the middle of the story.

The angel of the LORD *found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"*

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered. **Genesis 16:7–8**

REFLECTION

1. Where do you go when you hide?

2. What is your first response to being mistreated?

3. **When was the last time you ran away? Where did you go physically, emotionally, and spiritually? Why there?**

4. **Where have you come from, and where are you going?**

PART TWO

It's in the wilderness that God finds Adam.

It's in the wilderness that God finds David.

It's in the wilderness that God finds Hagar.

It's in the wilderness that God will find you.

In the geography of our spiritual trauma called pornography, infidelity, workaholism, self-pleasure, self-protection, self-righteousness, addiction, abuse, or even running away to die, God shows up. And when He does show up, how does He speak?

He speaks without accusation. There is no condemnation, no shame. That is not the language of God. Our Savior speaks compassionately, asking, "Where have you come from, and where are you going?"

This is the next scene in Hagar's story.

> ***Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." 19 The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count."***
>
> ***11 The angel of the LORD also said to her:***
>
> ***"You are now pregnant***
> ***and you will give birth to a son.***
> ***You shall name him Ishmael,***

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*for the LORD **has heard of your misery.***
12 He will be a wild donkey of a man;
his hand will be against everyone
and everyone's hand against him,
and he will live in hostility
toward all his brothers."

13 She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." 14 That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

15 So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.
Genesis 16:9–16

This text has so much going on. We'll stick with Hagar.

The angel of the LORD continues to talk with Hagar. The angel declares that Hagar's child will be a son, and he prophesies about the son's life. The angel says the child's name will be Ishmael, which means *God hears*.

The angel blesses Hagar.

"*I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.*" **(v. 10)**

Hagar's response is beautiful.

"You are the God who sees me...I have now seen the One who sees me." **(v. 13)**

In the wilderness, God reveals Himself to us in two ways: He is the God who hears, and He is the God who sees.

Make sure you catch this. In the wilderness, in the place where Hagar has run away to die—it's here that we learn about the character of God. He is the God who hears and the God who sees. Your wilderness, the place where you go to hide, the place where you look at pornography or the other places you run do not separate you from God. Your wilderness connects you with God.

REFLECTION

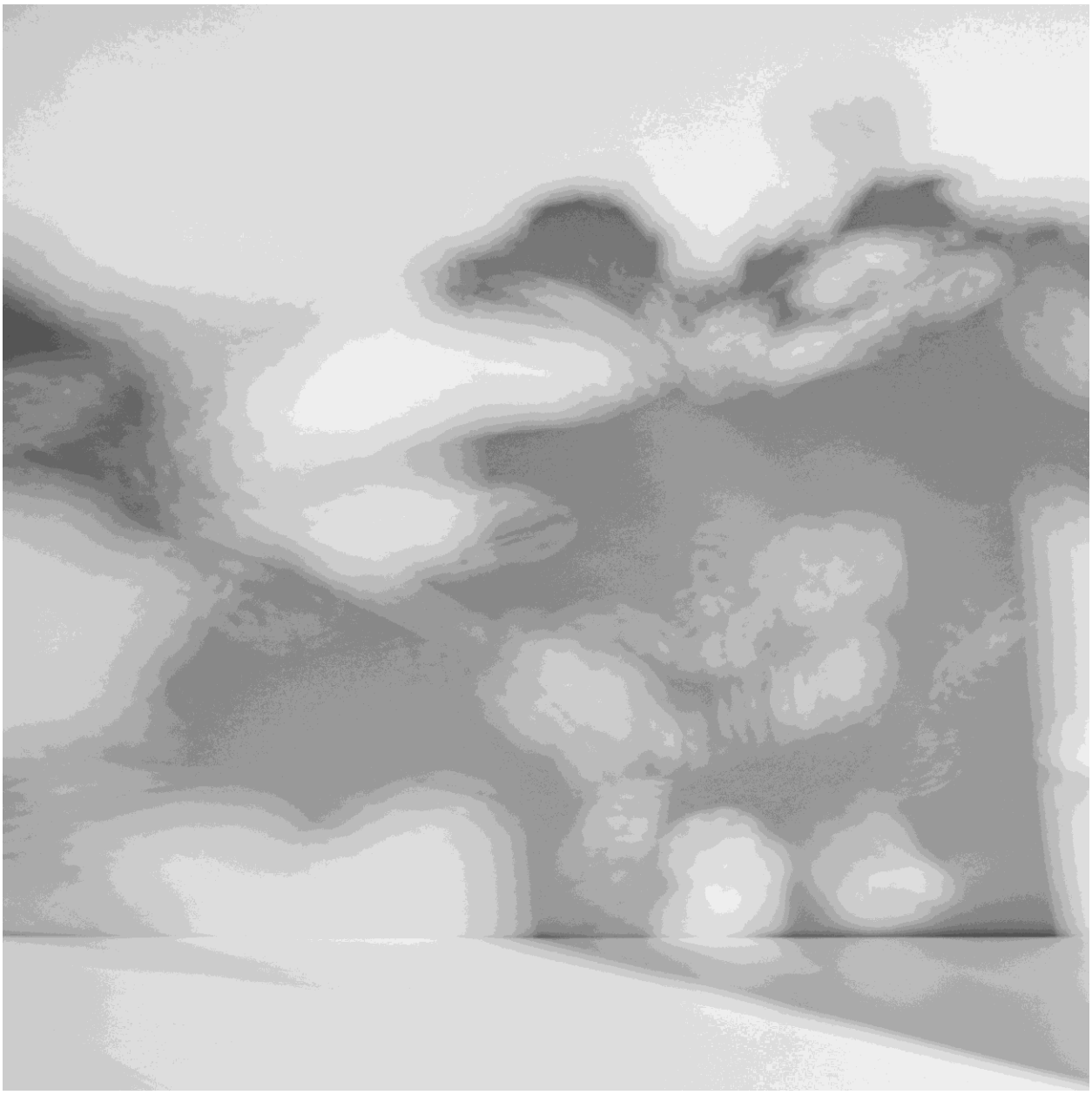
1. When was the last time you felt fully seen and fully heard? Describe what that felt like.

2. The angel blesses Hagar with a promise. What are the foundational promises of God that allow you to rest?

3. Why does the angel send Hagar back to the place where she was mistreated? Why was that necessary?

4. What if God asked you to go back to the place that is most personal to you? What if He asked you to go back to a place where you have been mistreated and maligned?

5. How do you sense that God sees you? How do you sense that He hears you?



WEEK THREE EXERCISE: THE SOUNDTRACK

The following story has been shared at Sanctuary a few times over the years. It was recently shared and discussed in a DMD group.

> **I had a really shitty marriage. Some of it was my fault . . . some of it wasn't.**
>
> **My son is a beautiful boy who is struggling with controlling his temper and showing empathy. He and I are doing our best to love and serve each other. Not every day is perfect, but I'm trying really hard to be a dad that lets him know he is loved by God and me.**
>
> **I'm called to love people that hate the church.**
>
> **I'm dating a 41-year-old recovering heroin addict named Anna who has been clean for fifteen years. She has two really cool kids that I love. She is beautiful and tells me often that she loves me, and I can tell by the way she looks at me that she means it. It is a wonderful thing to have common ground, intimacy, and trust with another person. She doesn't just need me; she wants me, too. She enjoys hanging out with me, and when we fight, issues are met head-on and we fight fair.**
>
> **It really sucks to always be needed but never wanted. It's the loneliest place on earth, I think.**

My life is kind of fucked up right now. But I'm feeling God's hands around me, and I still feel Him drawing me into His purpose.

God is good.

The DMD group discussed the known reality of a couple of lines in this story.

"She doesn't just need me; she wants me, too."

"It really sucks to always be needed but never wanted. It's the loneliest place on earth, I think."

Confessions began to come from around the room.

"I know exactly what that feels like."

"I felt wanted by a woman in my office; I've never been so close to an affair."

"Me, too."

"That's the soundtrack of my life."

"I'm renaming my playlist 'The Loneliest Place on Earth.'"

Soon the conversation turned to one-sentence phrases that are heard on repeat, especially in moments of being mistreated, misunderstood, self-soothing, self-loathing, or self-protection. Here are a few of the phrases:

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I'm always needed but never wanted.
I am not enough.
It's my fault.
I'm too much.
I'll never get it right.
I don't matter, anyway.
I'll never get it together.
If you only knew.
You have no idea.
My love won't change a thing.

Jay Stringer reminds us, "The longer our unwanted sexual behavior persists unaddressed, the more likely it is that we will feel unwanted as well."

REFLECTION

1. What is the one-sentence phrase you hear over and over again?

2. Where does that phrase take you? What does it lead you to think about?

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3. **When did you first began to hear that phrase? What is its source?**

4. **What is the one-sentence phrase you'd like to hear over and over again?**

"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing." **Psalm 23:1**

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SEXUALLY REDEEMED—MY STORY

How do you view the current reality of your sexual story?

What longing or hope do you have for your sexual story?

DISCUSSION

> *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*
> *29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* ³*9 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* **Matthew 11:28–30**
>
> *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.* **James 5:16**

Share as God leads. Use the following questions if they will be helpful.

1. How do you receive Jesus' invitation to come to Him? Why is He inviting you in?
2. What is causing you to be weary and burdened?
3. What is currently bringing you life that leads to rest?
4. "And you will find rest for your soul." How might you live in that truth today?
5. How might your friends around the table join you in prayer and presence?

BENEDICTION—JASON CABASSA

Lord, I come to You broken and empty. You see me in my darkest places, and yet You still love me.

Jesus, help me to continue this fight, as sometimes I feel so lonely in my shame that I'm scared to face the day. I hide so much that it has separated me from my true reality.

Lord, I need You like never before. I pray that in my hurt, in my shame, and in my hidden state, You will continue to fight for me. Help me to continue to see that I'm not in this alone, that You are guiding me through the waters. This fight is a battle in the unseen realm. The devil seeks to entice my thoughts, but You desire to have my heart.

So in my brokenness, in my shame, and in my hurt, I give it all to You. This life is not my own. It's Yours. Have Your way in me, Lord.

Amen.

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Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
2 Blessed is the one
whose sin the LORD does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

3 When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
4 For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD."
And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.

e Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.
' You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.
Psalm 32:1–7

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." **Matthew 11:28–30**

WEEK FOUR
THERE IS NO FEAR IN LOVE

PART ONE

> *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.* **1 John 4:18**

There is no fear in love.

It's the recognition of nakedness that first causes fear. Adam had been naked his whole life, but at the fall, his eyes were opened (Genesis 3:7). Adam, who once had a perfect relationship with God, is now afraid of God, afraid of Eve…he's even afraid of himself.

> *"I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid"*
> **(Genesis 3:10).**

From that moment, fear became a consequence of sin. And from that moment, God has made a way for us to live and love without fear.

John the Beloved declares this truth, as recorded in 1 John 4:7–21.

> *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*
>
> *This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and*

they in God. [16]e And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. [17] This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. [18] There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because he first loved us. 29 Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

"Perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment." Paul echoes these words in his letter to the Romans.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus
(Romans 8:1).

Man's greatest desire is to be fully known and fully loved. Man's greatest fear is to be fully known and fully loved.

The fear of punishment looks different for each of us. The fear of hell, the fear of rejection, the fear of being left, the fear of not being enough, the fear of_____.

Sexual brokenness causes men fear more than any other area in our lives. It's the root of so much of our trauma and shame. God says it doesn't have to be. Fear doesn't have to win, not for one more moment.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. **1 John 4:16**

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> **The God of the universe is neither surprised by nor ashamed of the sexual behavior we participate in. Instead, he understands it to be the very stage through which the work of redemption will be played out in our lives. Present sin is the doorway to the wider work of the gospel to bring healing to the wounds of the past and comfort, even power, to the difficulties of the present. Therefore, the sooner we assume a posture of curiosity for our sexual brokenness, the more we will prepare our hearts for the redemptive work ahead.[6]**

You don't have to be afraid. He loved you before you ever loved Him. He loves you just as you are, right where you are.

REFLECTION

1. Is it actually possible to love without fear? What would that sound like to you? What would it feel like? What would it *not* sound like or feel like?

2. "God is love." Do you believe that about God, or do you believe His character to be anything other than love?

3. **How might it be possible for your sexual brokenness to be "the doorway to the wider work of the gospel to bring healing to the wounds of the past? Describe.**

4. **How does giving and receiving love from your brothers and sisters actually bring about deeper healing?**

PART TWO

Those who struggle most with sexual immorality are not those who have fallen the hardest; they are those who have learned to resign themselves to small doses of unwanted sexual behavior over a lifetime.

We won't allow ourselves to engage in sexual extremities; we know better than that. Instead, we wade into what we believe to be manageable spaces and places of sexual immorality. We curate behavior that, if we were to get caught, would most likely not cost us our relationships or careers. We are too smart for that.

Instead, we slowly deaden our hearts' ability to believe that meaningful change could ever come.

We choose fear.

> **The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope. (Tim Keller,** *The Meaning of Marriage***)**

Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

Can you, without fear, trust your brother or sister with your sexual brokenness? Can you allow someone to know all of you? Can you trust God with your fear?

In a desire to prove our spiritual worthiness, we rarely allow our small group, or our "brother or sister," to know our whole selves. We either self-deprecate, or we share just enough to keep them close.

This is why accountability rarely helps us move past sexual sin. The law will never bring freedom. "Lust management," like blocking software, is a good thing, but it will only take us so far. For most, accountability hasn't worked because fear has deadened our courage to be honest. What is needed is a place—a person, a community—where we can accept our brokenness, not with shame and self-hate, but with dignity. Our sexual expressions are indicators of our longing for true intimacy. God-given intimacy. The kind of intimacy and vulnerability that allows for love to be freely given and received. The kind of love in which there is no fear.

REFLECTION

1. How has fear deadened your heart?

2. What role has traditional accountability had in growing you in Christlikeness?

3. How has "lust management" freed you, or how has it held you in ever-increasing bondage?

4. In what current relationship do you sense a real peace, a relationship where "there is no fear in love"?

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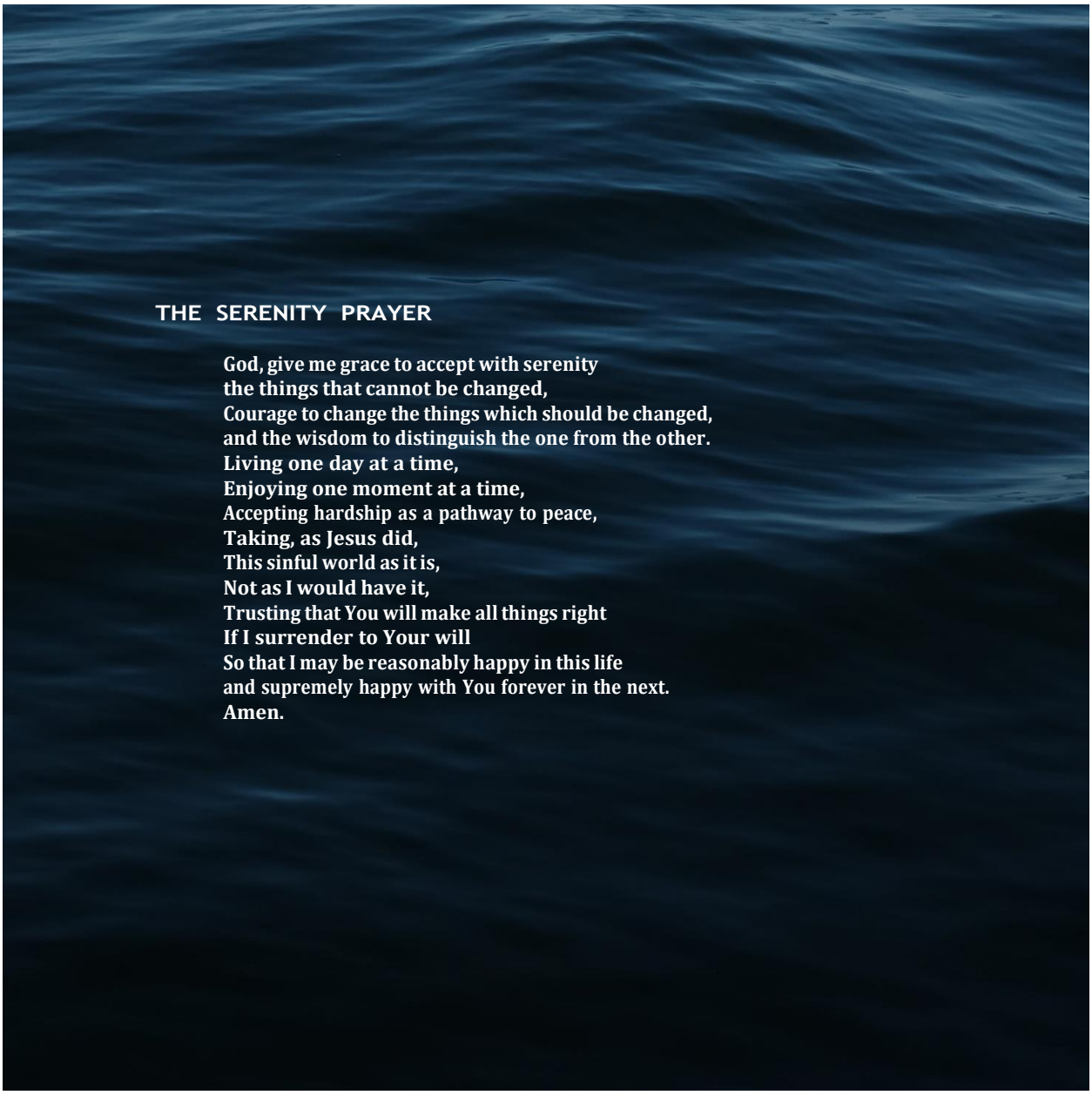
THE SERENITY PRAYER
God, give me grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things which should be changed,
and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.
Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right
If I surrender to Your will
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.

WEEK FOUR EXERCISE: THE BILLY GRAHAM RULES

In 1948, Billy Graham began a series of evangelistic meetings in Modesto, California. Through a series of conversations about ministry life and its challenges, his ministry team resolved to uphold the highest standard of biblical morality and integrity.

In the following excerpt from his autobiography *Just As I Am*, Billy Graham went into further detail about the resolutions these men made in terms of financial integrity, sexual morality, publicity, and partnership with the local church. Their resolutions became known as "The Modesto Manifesto."

> **One afternoon during the Modesto meetings, I called the Team together to discuss the problem. Then I asked them to go to their rooms for an hour and list all the problems they could think of that evangelists and evangelism encountered.**
>
> **When they returned, the lists were remarkably similar, and in a short amount of time, we made a series of resolutions or commitments among ourselves that would guide us in our future evangelistic work. In reality, it was more of an informal understanding among ourselves—a shared commitment to do all we could to uphold the Bible's standard of absolute integrity and purity for evangelists.**
>
> **The first point on our combined list was money. Nearly all evangelists at that time—including us—were supported by love offerings taken at the meetings. The temptation to wring as much money as possible out of an audience, often with strong emotional appeals, was too great for some evangelists. In addition, there was little or no accountability for finances. It was a system that was easy to**

abuse—and led to the charge that evangelists were in it only for the money.

I had been drawing a salary from YFC [Youth for Christ] and turning all offerings from YFC meetings over to YFC committees, but my new independent efforts in citywide Campaigns required separate finances. In Modesto we determined to do all we could to avoid financial abuses and to downplay the offering and depend as much as possible on money raised by the local committee in advance.

The second item on the list was the danger of sexual immorality. We all knew of evangelists who had fallen into immorality while separated from their families by travel. We pledged among ourselves to avoid any situation that would have even the appearance of compromise or suspicion. From that day on, I did not travel, meet, or eat alone with a woman other than my wife. We determined that the Apostle Paul's mandate to the young pastor Timothy would be ours as well: "Flee ... youthful lusts" (2 Timothy 2:22, KJV).

Our third concern was the tendency of many evangelists to carry on their work apart from the local church, even to criticize local pastors and churches openly and scathingly. We were convinced, however, that this was not only counterproductive but also wrong from the Bible's standpoint. We were determined to cooperate with all who would cooperate with us in the public proclamation of the Gospel, and to avoid an antichurch or anticlergy attitude.

The fourth and final issue was publicity. The tendency among some evangelists was to exaggerate their successes or to claim higher attendance numbers than they really had. This likewise discredited evangelism and brought the whole enterprise under suspicion. It often made the press so suspicious of evangelists that they refused to take notice of their work. In Modesto we committed ourselves to integrity in our publicity and our reporting.

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> **So much for the Modesto Manifesto, as Cliff [Barrows] called it in later years. In reality, it did not mark a radical departure for us; we had always held these principles. It did, however, settle in our hearts and minds, once and for all, the determination that integrity would be the hallmark of both our lives and our ministry.**[7]

Billy Graham and his ministry changed the world forever. The Kingdom of God advanced as Billy Graham and his team followed Christ at every step.

Yet toward the end of Graham's life, he wrote these words: "All of my life I was taught how to die as a Christian, but no one ever taught me how I ought to live in the years before I die."

There is a dynamic difference between living "in the fear of God" and living in fear. Many of us who were raised with the "Billy Graham Rules" and the culture of the purity movement missed the fullness of God expressed in sexuality. Our relationships with the opposite sex were inhibited as we were taught how to live in the fear of God but not accurately taught how to live in the freedom that Jesus came to bring (John 10:10).

Instead of being arrested by rules that restrict us, keeping us from seeing and knowing the Triune God because we have disconnected from part of His body, why not develop rules that bring us life? Why not become different kinds of people—people whose choices accurately reflect the will and the ways of God, people who live in the reality that "up there has come down here" in all aspects of our being and doing?

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1. Today, and in this next season of life, where/how would you like to learn to live?

2. What is one rule you to which you hold fast? What is one rule that has frustrated you your entire life?

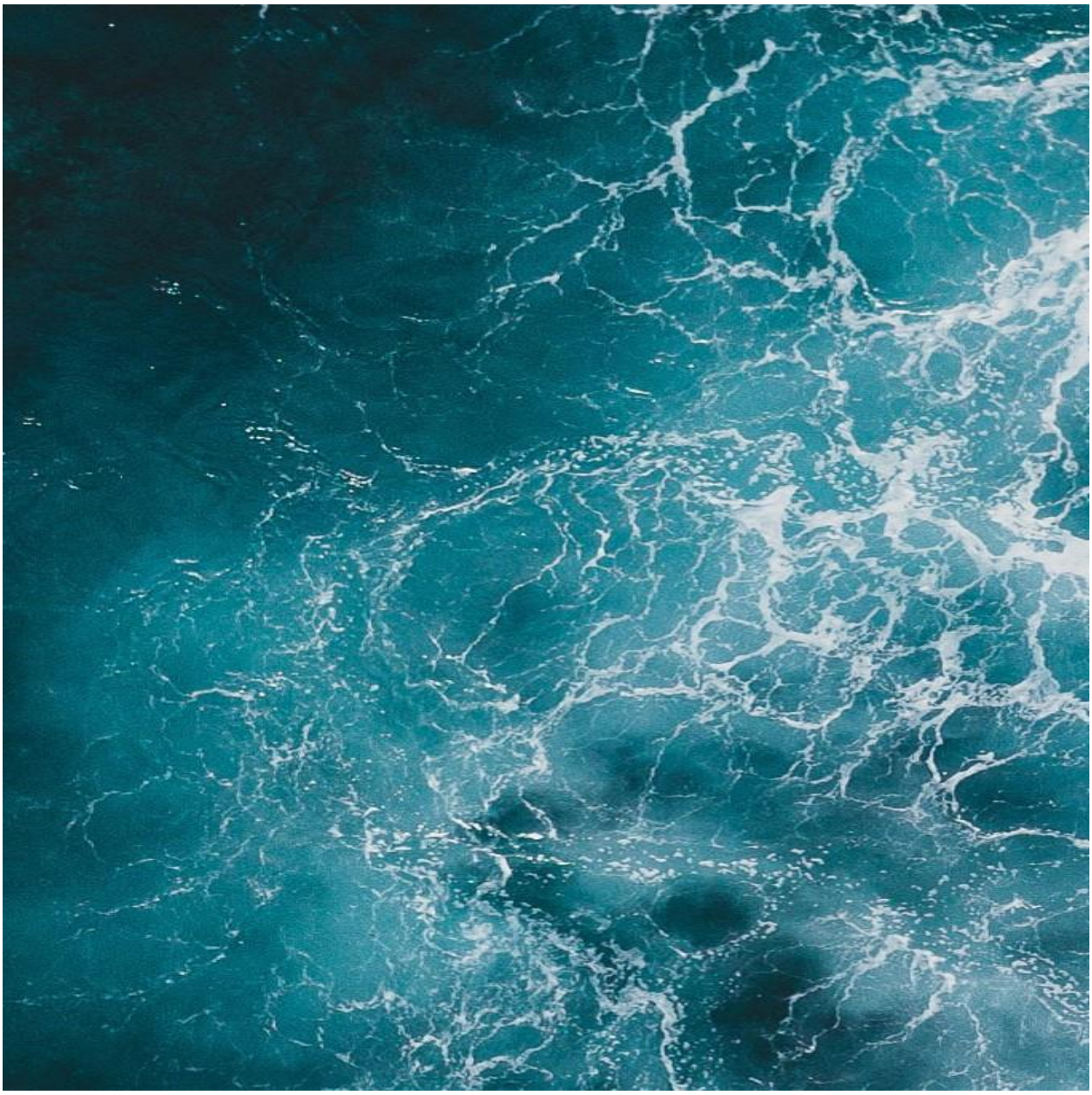
3. Describe a season in your life when you attempted to live with "lust management." What was the outcome of that season?

4. Have you been primarily ruled by fear or guided by fear as it relates to your relationship with women? Describe the difference.

Jay Stringer reminds us of the Good News.

> **Approaches to healing that are centered on what is wrong with us will never lead to the type of transformation we desire and deserve. The gospel teaches us that we are beloved before any sexual sin or addiction entered our lives, and we remain so, even at the height of our brokenness.[8]**

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. **Galatians 5:1**



SEXUALLY REDEEMED—MY STORY

Think of a time when you felt the beauty of your body or your sexuality. What images or scenes emerge for you?

How does God's view of you and His love for you lead you to rest more completely in His grace?

DISCUSSION

> ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. [29] Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30] For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."***
> **Matthew 11:28–30**

> ***Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*** **James 5:16**

Share as God leads. Use the following questions if they will be helpful.

1. **How do you receive Jesus' invitation to come to Him? Why is He inviting you in?**
2. **What is causing you to be weary and burdened?**
3. **What is currently bringing you life that leads to rest?**
4. **"And you will find rest for your soul." How might you live in that truth today?**
5. **How might your friends around the table join you in prayer and presence?**

BENEDICTION—RANDY ELSTER

Lord Jesus,

Thank You that because of Your sacrifice on the cross, I can have intimacy with You and with the Father. Thank You that You look at me not with condemnation, but with joy and love. When You look at me, You smile. And You smile big. I want to dwell in that intimacy and walk in the garden with You. I want to know the pleasure that You have in me. I want to know Your love, a love that gives without hesitation, without reservation. I want to give that love and receive it. I want to be known and yet loved unhesitatingly, as You love.

I draw near to You, Lord Jesus, to learn what true intimacy really is.

In Your name I pray and continue the conversation,

Amen.

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THE HIGH PRIESTLY PRAYER

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, [21] that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. [22] I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— [23] I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

[24] "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

[25] "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. [26] I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them." **John 17:20–26**

WEEK FIVE
COMFORT FOR US; COMFORT FOR OTHERS

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, [4] *who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*
2 Corinthians 1:3–4

PART ONE

"In this world you will have trouble."

Jesus said these words in the last week of His life. The disciples had no idea the kind of trouble they would soon face.

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." **John 16:33**

Paul would later remind a struggling Corinthian church that God is the Father of compassion and the God of *all* comfort, the God who comforts us in *all* our troubles.

Our God is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. He desires for us to live in His peace.

The writer of Hebrews speaks this truth about our Great High Priest, Jesus.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. [15] *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.* [16] *Let us then approach God's throne of*

> *grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* **Hebrews 4:14–16**

Our High Priest is able to empathize with our weakness. In Him, we receive mercy and find grace to help us.

Let's put it all together.

Our God desires for us to live in His peace. Our God is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. Our God comforts us in all our troubles. Our God isn't surprised or disappointed by our weakness; rather, He empathizes with our weaknesses (plural). Because He has been tempted in every way and yet was without sin, and because He has overcome the world, He now freely gives us a pathway to live more fully in His peace. He gives us mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.

This is the God who loved us first, while we were yet sinners. This is the God we serve.

In Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, he makes sure the church knows that God is the God of all comfort. Then Paul takes it one step further: the comfort we receive is not solely for us. Notice the breadth of God's perfect plan as spoken through Paul.

> *The God of all comfort…comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*
> **2 Corinthians 1:3b–4**

God comforts us so we can comfort others.

If there is one area of life in which the mature need to speak into the lives of the immature, it is in this space of sexual brokenness. Identity, shame, sexual proclivities, abuse, doubt—all of this brokenness can be comforted by the God of all comfort who

asks those who have been comforted to partner with Him in comforting and blessing others.

Jesus said to His disciples, and specifically to Peter, "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18).

Every time a person is left alone in their troubles, Hell overcomes. Every time a person abuses or is haunted by abuse, Hell overcomes. Every time a person thinks of sex and consequently feels damaged and ruined, Hell overcomes. Every time a person feels he/she is ruled and reigned by his/her appetites, open wounds, and lust, Hell overcomes. Every time a person believes he/she should be strong enough to "fix it," Hell overcomes. Hell wins every time a person believes anything other than the truth that he/she is the beloved.

> ***...so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.***

REFLECTION

1. In what part of your life have you been comforted by the Father of all compassion, the God of all comfort?

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2. Where do you sense trouble in your life? How does that trouble motivate you or paralyze you?

3. How has God used another person to bring comfort to you?

4. Who is God inviting you to partner with—with His help—to empathize in weakness and bring comfort?

PART TWO

The film *The Heart of Man* is the timeless tale of a father's relentless pursuit of his son, interwoven with interviews on brokenness, identity, and shame.

A group of 20-somethings recently gathered to watch this movie. Its impact on the group was powerful; it was palpable. The movie is not perfect, but it does give a wider lens to the parable of Jesus as told in Luke 15.

At Sanctuary, we believe in the intimate dynamic of relationship. This film helps portray the call to not just grow in their own faith, but to grow "in Christ for the sake of others."

In his book *The Gift of Being Yourself*, David Benner calls us back to the community of our Triune God.

> **Moving truths such as "God loves me" from our head to our heart is often difficult. It is possible, but only as we journey with others. The God who is Divine community is known only in human community. Deep knowing of perfect love, just like deep knowing of ourselves, demands that we be in relationships of spiritual friendship. No one should ever expect to make the journey alone.[9]**

After the movie, we'll share our own sexual stories.

SEXUALLY REDEEMED—SHARING YOUR SEXUAL STORY

Over the last few weeks, each of us has given thought to different aspects of our own sexual story. Today, we'll add one last important thought. It's this:

How does God's view of and love for you lead you to rest more completely in His redemption?

We believe we are healed as we learn to live in and tell our stories. Using your answers to the prompts over the last four weeks, take ten minutes to share your story with your brothers. After each person at the table shares, your table leader will guide you in

prayer.

WEEK FIVE EXERCISE: THE PLACE MOST PERSONAL

While tending his father-in-law's sheep in "the far side of the wilderness," Moses is called by God. You know the story. Burning bush, holy ground, "I AM." From the bush that is not consumed by the fire, God calls Moses back to the place that is most personal to him, the place where he was raised. The place where he experienced injustice, slavery, and the dehumanization of his people—God's people. The place where Moses killed a man. The place from where he ran. God said, "So now, go" (Exodus 3:10).

Many years ago, Rudy and Katie Gleason were called to orphans and the vulnerable in Ethiopia. It was a place most personal to them. Jay and Tracy Arntzen were called to orphans and the vulnerable in Cambodia. This too was a calling most personal to them. It was a different kind of call than the Gleasons', but it was unmistakably God's voice that called them. A bunch of years ago, Craig and Kristy Bowler began Sanctuary. It was a calling most personal to them.

The place most personal is usually a place or a people where pain was experienced on a very deep level. For Moses, the pain was the oppression of his people in Egypt. For Rudy and Katie, the pain was the death of their infant daughter in Ethiopia as she awaited adoption. For Craig and Kristy, the pain was the breakdown of the local church.

REFLECTION

1. Where is "the place most personal" for you? Who is it? What is it? Note your response below. If you are unsure, try using the prompts below to help you discern your most personal place.

- **What is a biblical truth that drives your deepest convictions?**
- **Why does that truth compel you so passionately?**
- **What wrong have you experienced in your life that God might want to use to ensure the same wrong doesn't occur in the lives of others?**
- **Where do you find yourself most at home?**
- **What is the one thing that brings you life to the full?**
- **If there was one thing to which you could give the rest of your life, what would it be?**

"Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever ***you go.*** *[8] Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and* ***successful.*** *[9] Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid;*

do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."
Joshua 1:7–9

BENEDICTION—SCOTT HELLMAN

God, thank You for who You are. You are a good, good Father who is always present, always faithful, and always loving. May Your truth open my heart to who You say that I am and who You have made me to be.

Father, there is so much in my past and so much in my life today that brings me to my knees. So much failure, so much hurt, so much pain…and it's all from choices I have made. I have so many regrets and so much I wish I could do over. Today, Jesus—right now, Jesus—I turn these over to You. I turn over the lies, the shame, and the guilt. I pray that I can find comfort in who You are and who You say that I am. I pray that this comfort will open my heart and my soul to live the life You have called me to live and to be the man, the father, and the son You have created me to be. God, I pray that I not only receive Your comfort, but that I believe in Your comfort and find rest in it.

Father, I pray that through Your truth, my belief in You, and through Your comfort, You will use me to comfort others around me. God, use my story—the one You are still writing in me—to bring comfort and healing to my brothers. I pray You will open my eyes to see others as You see them. Open my heart to be filled with more of You so I may love others as You love me, loving with compassion and without judgment or comparison. I pray You will use me to speak against the guilt, the shame, and the lies of the evil one. Fill my words and actions with Your truth so that it will bring comfort to others.

Father, I sing your praises on high!

Amen.

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Be merciful to those who doubt; [23] save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

[24] To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— [25] to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. **Jude 22–25**

APPENDIX A

STATEMENT ON SEX AND SEXUALITY

The following statement aims to provide a wholistic and elevated view of sex that honors God's intentions and design for human sexuality while standing in contrast to views that relegate sex to a bodily act devoid of any spiritual meaning. This statement distinguishes what Scripture affirms and upholds about the meaning and purposes of sex in the Christian worldview, not merely what we deny or understand as mere transgression.

THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST IN SEX AND SEXUALITY

We confess that Jesus Christ is Lord over all things, including sex (1 Corinthians 6:13). Therefore, our understanding of sex and sexuality is received from God through Scripture as our final authority for belief and practice (1 Thessalonians 4:8). Non-biblical interpretations of sex and sexuality, which interpret sex in terms of human authority, are at odds with the Lordship of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:3–5). They must be critiqued and resisted by God's people. The Lordship of Christ compels all of His followers to believe and live by the following in regard to sex and sexuality.

GOD'S TRIFOLD DESIGN OF SEX AND SEXUALITY

God's purpose for sexual union includes a trifold design consisting of three dimensions that are intertwined, interdependent, and complementary: the consummation of the

marriage covenant, procreation, and pleasure.

Sex consummates marriage **as the physical sign and seal of the covenantal partnership (Genesis 2:18) or marital love (Malachi 2:14), creating a new family unit (Genesis 2:23–24; Ephesians 5:31). It is the sign act that ratifies and continually affirms the ongoing exclusive life commitment and love (Song of Songs 2:16; 1 Corinthians 7:39) between two persons, male and female, as one flesh (Genesis 2:24–25; Song of Songs 8:6–7; Matthew 19:4–6).**

Sex is for procreation **(Malachi 2:15), fulfilling the mandate to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28), by which the one-flesh union of husband and wife creates a new, holy life (1 Corinthians 7:14) and ensouled body.**

Sex is a unique expression of the human experience of intimacy **(Song of Songs 4:16) and pleasure (Song of Songs 1:4). It is an expression of our design in the image of a relational God (John 17:21–23) which reflects His wholehearted love and forwards His intentions for humans to experience the pleasure of relational and physical intimacy (Song of Songs 5:4–5).**

GOD'S PURPOSE FOR SEX AND SEXUALITY

We believe that sex is one expression of the many ways God has created us in His image. We believe that God has created human beings as male and female (Genesis 1:27) and that our sexuality is an expression of His unique capacity for relationship, as is found in the Trinity. As a result, we believe there are specific implications for sex and sexuality, as we are made in the image of a Triune God according to His specific design.

Sex and sexuality are good and holy (Genesis 2:23–24; Hebrews 13:4). We believe that our desire for sex and our sexuality reflects how we are made in the image of a Triune God who exists in the relationship between Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit (John

17:21), and that human sexuality reflects the relational intimacy and capacity of God.

We understand that sex is an expression of how God has designed us but is not essential to our meaningful existence. Life is meaningful and good without sex (John 10:10; 1 Corinthians 7:1). In our future resurrected state, sex and marriage will be no more (Matthew 22:30). Sex, as a sacramental sign of the divine-human relationship, becomes unnecessary upon the consummation of the marital union of Christ and us, His bride (Ephesians 5:31–32; Revelation 19:7).

Like all creation, we believe that sex and sexuality have been distorted by the fall of mankind (sin's impact on disfiguring God's design). These fallen expressions of sex or sexuality begin in the mind in the form of lust and are externalized as outward actions of the body. They include adultery, pornography, polygamy, premarital sex, homosexual sex, sexual assault or abuse, pedophilia, bestiality, incest, and the like (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 19:29; Romans 1:26–27; 1 Thessalonians 4:3–7; Hebrews 13:4). We believe that expressions of sexuality such as these are not part of God's design.

AFFIRMATION OF SEX AND SEXUALITY

We affirm that the proper Scriptural context for the expression of human sexuality can take place only within the boundaries of a monogamous marriage between a biological man and a biological woman. Only within the context of this marriage can the sexual relationship take place without violating God's Scriptural design and purpose. In this context, it fulfills the purposes of sex as an expression of permanent and exclusive commitment until death, open to the possibility of conceiving a child, and enjoying the pleasures of intimacy. Furthermore, we believe that sex within the covenant of an exclusive heterosexual marriage is a temporary symbol which points to the second coming of Christ. When Jesus returns, He will unite God with all His people in the same way sex unites two different human beings (a man and a woman) in one human union.

From this biblical-theological understanding, Sanctuary draws its grace-filled teaching and practice on sex and sexuality.

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NOTES

[1] Gene Edwards, ***The Divine Romance*** (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993), 66–67

[2] Charles Swindoll, ***Great Lives: David*** (Thomas Nelson, 1997), 20

[3] Stasi Eldredge, *Becoming Myself: Embracing God's Dream of You* (David C. Cook, 2013), 76

[4] Jay Stringer, *Unwanted: How Sexual Brokenness Reveal Our Way to Healing* (NavPress, 2018), 11

[5] Ibid., various pages

[6] Ibid., 28–29

[7] Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (HarperCollins Worldwide and Zondervan, 2007), 128–129

[8] Stringer, *Unwanted*, 6

[9] David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* (InterVarsity Press, 2015), 49

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